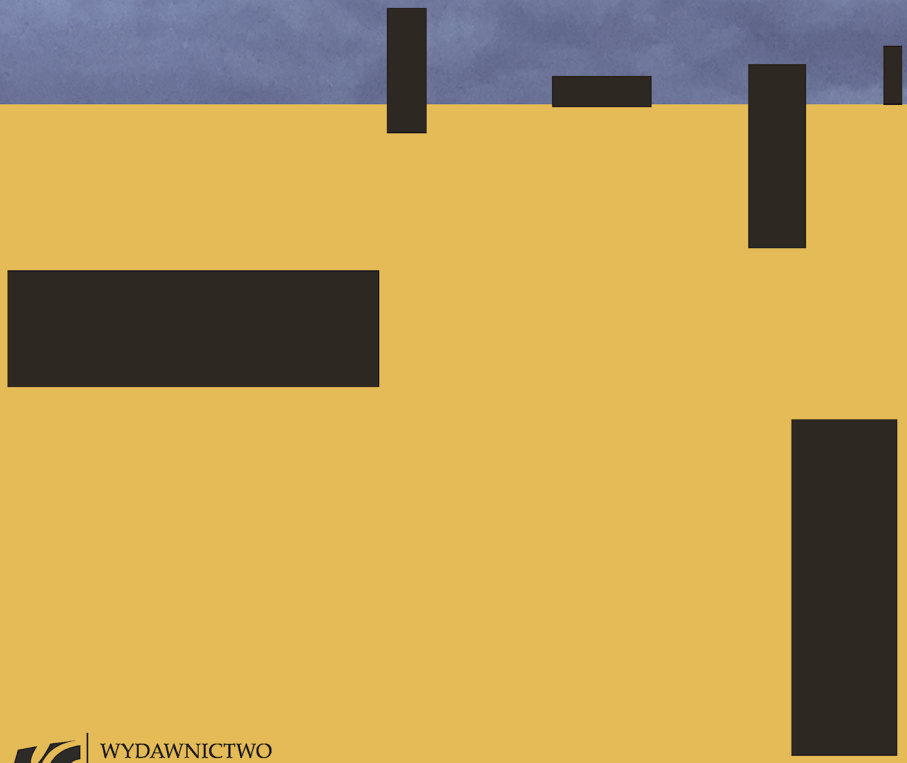
Sławomir Masłoń

Père-versions of the Truth
The Novels of J. M. Coetzee

Expanded Second Edition



WYDAWNICTWO
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The Novels of J. M. Coetzee

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Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego • Katowice 2018

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He remembers Maximov's assistant and the question he asked: "What kind of book do you write?" He knows now the answer he should have given: "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen."

J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*

Introduction

Most of the novels of J. M. Coetzee are founded on the same structural principle: within the bounds of the narrative an empty space is introduced, an enigma that the narrative will try to unravel but by which it will be ultimately defeated. In his earlier novels, the confrontation between the enigma and the explanatory narrative is played out within the space of the colonial discourse, usually figured in the relation between a victim and a liberal representative of the colonial power abhorring the "everyday" methods of control used by the rulers. In fact, in Coetzee's writing the inability of the subjugated to express themselves becomes progressively more and more acute: while the barbarian girl does not know how to answer the Magistrate because she does not know what he wants from her (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), in Michael K this inability becomes somehow "naturalised" as he is hare-lipped and "not clever with words" (*Life and Times of Michael K*), and ultimately Friday (*Foe*) is not able to speak because of the paradigmatic (and metaphoric) colonial mutilation of the cutting out of his tongue.

Within the context of the liberal novel discourse this attitude is quite familiar and can be subsumed under the Levinasian approach promulgated by the multiculturalist discourse as a novelistic version of the "respect for the other." As the victim of colonialism is disadvantaged in all respects, not only being the subject of naked violence and cultural subjugation but also having no means of expressing his predicament (lack of intellectual "tools" to "give voice" to himself), the only respectful attitude towards the victim that the liberal writer can take is to try to present the unfortunate protagonist as the unsurpassable challenge that cannot be overcome by the discourse

of the novelist (ultimately the representative of colonising power). Thus the meaning of the victim remains inaccessible within such discourse, although it leaves its trace there, the trace that will always constitute a challenge. But this is not all, for within the context of such liberal attitude the irretrievable meaning of the victim does not only pose the inaccessible truth as the truth of pain of which it is impossible to speak by definition but this very impossibility seems to radiate a certain transcendence, a certain *human* universal, the properly existential meaning of what it is to be a human being, which can be summarised as "this fragile creature who can be hurt."

In this context, after a series of "enigmatic" novels, Coetzee's *Age of Iron* takes an unexpected step: from its narrative the central "inaccessibility" characteristic of the earlier novels vanishes and what appears in its place is the *split* colonised other: on the one hand, the actual violent insurgent against apartheid, on the other, the black alcoholic derelict. What is more, these two incompatible attitudes are confronted by a proper representative of the liberal discourse complete with the sanction of the ideal of "harmonious" humanity bestowed on her by her education – a retired university lecturer on the classics. And although *Age of Iron* is in many respects artistically inferior to its predecessors, or perhaps *because* it is inferior – that is, because the crucial antagonism in it escapes to some extent being aesthetically sublimated – the truth of the inaccessible other is put into a sharper focus: the chiasmus appears which illustrates why the other's ineffable trace is only a ruse of the colonialist discourse.

In such a confrontation both the speakable and the unspeakable situate themselves on each side of the split. When the other appears in the form of the insurgent, the "humanist" discourse *knows exactly* what is the meaning of the message of the other (violent overthrow of power) but such message is within the liberal paradigm utterly incomprehensible (how can he sacrifice all that is "human" in him for "death-driven male constructions"). When the other is incarnated by the derelict, his meaning is incomprehensible (what is his dark secret which makes him live like that?), while his message is perfectly understood: he demands pity and human heart. One should note that only in the second case is something akin to the kernel of transcendence (amenable to be novelistically developed and amplified) hidden (the dark secret, the cause of becoming the victim), while the insurgent is taken to be utterly transparent – his motivations are all too obvious and therefore not amenable to becoming a subject of a "humanistic" novel, which would treat them as simplistic propaganda lacking in "human" truth, that is, in an existential di-

mension.[1] Yet, the choice encountered here is only twofold: either the truth of the black alcoholic, if it exists, has to be expressed in the language of the struggle (e.g. as dropping out of it), or his truth will become installed as a fascinating enigmatic image of the irretrievable secret in the familiar practice of "exoticising" the other, that is, projecting on him one's own images of enjoyment, the substance inaccessible to the colonialist subject. In this sense, the mortally ill Curren (the former university lecturer), who has never been a believer, projects on Vercueil (the alcoholic) her clearly fantasmatic image of him as her guardian angel that will help her to the "other side." It is a very telling image in the context of the liberal novel: Curren gets off on transcendence but only at second hand. In other words, one disavows transcendence (one is a "postmodernist"); the other, however, seems to have access to something substantial beyond one's understanding; therefore by revering the other one reveres precisely the (empty because inaccessible) image of such transcendence. In effect, one ultimately enjoys one's own reverence of the other's transcendence by means of which one appears likable to oneself, since this image makes one "more" than one positively (substantially) is. In other words, this object/image, which is, properly speaking, nothing (the image of "something more/enigmatic in the other"), creates a lack in us (there is something in the other I cannot comprehend), yet this lack instantly turns into a surplus in the liberal discourse (I enjoy my reverence for the other's enigma as what makes me properly "human"). The crucial point, however, is that the secret in the other is what I inserted into him in the first place to make him *interesting* for me in ways that, for example, the insurgent is not – he is treated as a misguided other who rather than wallowing in his substantial enigma has become thoroughly alienated from his substance by adopting the discourse of the master (violence) and returning it to him.[2]

A clear exposition of such obscenity of the discourse of the enigma is provided by Coetzee in *The Master of Petersburg*, which is tellingly taken out of the colonial space of ethnic difference and placed within the racially neutral discourse in which Dostoevsky has to confront his two "sons," Pavel (his stepson) and Nechaev (a revolutionary who identifies himself with Raskolnikov before his "fall" into Orthodox Christianity). This time, what the stakes are behind the confronta-

[1] Of course, "propagandist" truths are not by definition excluded from the discourse of the novel, as the example of Brecht shows.

[2] The logic of "something enigmatic" in the other is, of course, the logic of Lacanian object *a*.

tion of the images becomes even clearer, since Dostoevsky's entire effort is spent on creating Pavel's image as the ineffably innocent victim (whose ultimate identification is Christ – the paradigm of an enigma) – in order to dissimulate his political engagement against the Father (God-Tsar-Dostoevsky) represented by Nechaev. What is more, such manipulation by Dostoevsky is only possible because Pavel is already dead and only as *dead* can his image be maintained as benign.

This truth having been registered on "neutral" grounds, the next novel can return to the colonial context and start with what it found in Petersburg, that is, with the image of the *jouisseur*. But not only that: what is superimposed on such an image is precisely the liberal discourse so familiar from the earlier novels, but because of such a superimposition the obscene smile of enjoyment lurks in its cracks. Thus, *Disgrace* is Coetzee's best novel precisely because it is least sentimental and least deluded. Although in *Age of Iron* the perverse enigmatising device was abandoned and the confrontation between the two incompatible figures of the other was posed, yet as soon as they were presented they became totally sentimentalised by Curren's melodramatic discourse which translated them into a lovable and unlovable other (the unlovable destroying and the lovable supporting "humane" identifications). In *Disgrace*, there is no victim on the side of the other and the moment it happens identification with the other becomes totally impossible for the liberal Lurie. Hence we encounter the limit of the liberal novel: the moment the victim disappears, and with him our exultation in our outrage, which is the ultimate support of liberal identification, we become confronted with the *monstrous and disgusting other* who thoroughly traumatises our discursive space since he does not seem to enjoy our liberal values. When there is no victim available on the side of the other, suddenly all the sentimentalising assumes its proper place, and rather than being spent on creating the space of the ineffable within the discourse, it is spent by Lurie on mourning himself and his victimised daughter. Yet the ultimate achievement of the novel lies in taking a step further and presenting a white victim, Lurie's daughter who has been raped by blacks, who does not accept the sentimentalising/aggressive discourse (two sides of the same coin) in which Lurie tries to explain away her reaction to their new place within the postcolonial space.

After what has been said above, the failure of *Slow Man* is not surprising. In it, Coetzee's usual manner of writing is taken out of the context in which it had been possible to stir its "compassionate"

and "universalist" overtones. That is to say, when the enigma was played out within a space of extremity, including subjective destitution as the outcome of torture, war, etc., the refusal to "explain" could be taken as a (or even *the*) narrative incarnation of respect for the suffering other, even if it sometimes smacked of capitulation before the inevitability of suffering in the hands of one power or another as belonging to human condition. However, when such circumstances are absent, all the "existential" implications seem to find their proper place and come back with a vengeance. In *Slow Man*, which takes place in safe Australia, the central "enigma" (or one of the two) is Rayment's refusal to wear a prosthesis: he "inexplicably" declines to behave like other people and become "able" again thanks to such "unnatural" means, deriding his new "reduced" life and supporting his refusal in terms of saving his "honour." Although Michael K could radiate a certain "grandeur" refusing to accept food offered to him within the space of colonial discourse and become in this way a sublime figure of resistance/truth for the medical officer as well as for the reader, this was possible only because of the very extremity of his situation and a careful manipulation of the allegorical and metaphorising context by Coetzee.[3] When, however, this "estranging" framework is removed, we encounter nothing but a narcissistic caricature in which the underside of the "enigmatic" discourse comes more clearly to light – Rayment's honourable fidelity turns out to be a fidelity to his idealised image of a man who lacks nothing, not even respect for the other. Without there being an extreme context of violence such identification with what is in him more than himself becomes nakedly ridiculous when it is incarnated in his repeated claims that without half of one of his legs he becomes *less human* – if one wants one more example of what the human truth stands for in this context, we have it here in a thoroughly indecent manner: the identification with one's "natural" image of wholeness as immortality.

And to fill out this teleological scenario of Coetzee's development as a writer – admittedly artificial, as all narratives of this sort have to be – we can add that although his first two books are aesthetic

[3] In this sense all of the novels that will be analysed in this book are aesthetically successful (apart from *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man* which fail for reasons already mentioned); notwithstanding the questionable (because ultimately narcissistic) "humanist" attitude they represent, Coetzee uses his devices to produce "transcendence" very skilfully and the reader *is* manipulated into assuming the surplus of ineffable meaning.

failures (and for that reason not included here[4]), it is their deficiencies precisely that bear witness to what Coetzee had to refine out of existence in order to become a "mature" liberal writer. In *Dusklands*, the respectable other does not exist because for the protagonists of both narratives in the book the appearance of the other within their discursive space constitutes the ultimate catastrophe and it inevitably provokes the crisis, that is, dissolution of their identities (there is no benign image of the other, unless I insert in his place the unacknowledged image of myself). On the other hand, *In the Heart of the Country* presents us with the consciously ridiculous and artificial image of transcendence embodied by the Spanish speaking gods in their flying machines, for whom the whole process of writing by the protagonist is passionately staged and who provide her in turn with obscure injunctions and enigmatic truths (not surprisingly these "transcendent" truths are bits and pieces of the old "European" knowledge: Hegel, etc.). These two truths – there is no transcendence of discourse apart from violence, and the image of enigmatic truth is a stand-in for this violence – which the first two books unashamedly flaunted, prevented the sublimation necessary for the aesthetic achievement, which was the creation of the following scheme: a stable (because central) place is assigned to a signifier (of the victim), but the inclusion of it within the chain of other signifiers (which would provide it with meaning within the context of a given novel) is repeatedly denied, yet with simultaneous insistence that the ultimate meaning of the narrative is hidden precisely in this "withdrawn" signifier. It is clear that what we encounter here is precisely the logic of the master signifier whose truth is the enjoyment of some version of the Father, a *père*-version of liberal discourse.

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[4] One of the reasons of the failure seemed to be Coetzee's as-yet "unsublimated" fascination with Beckett – which is especially noticeable in *In the Heart of the Country*. Beckett's discourse is not very amenable to the inevitably political confrontations of the colonial-cum-familial discursive space.

Waiting for the Barbarians (1980)

This most allegorical of Coetzee's novels commences with the familiar confrontation of two faces of power, in this case two types of functionaries in the service of an Empire, the state of which we shall not learn anything about in the course of the book. The unnamed narrator bears the position of Magistrate, the highest authority in a fort on the southern outskirts of the Empire beyond whose dominions lie wasteland territories populated by nomadic tribes called the barbarians. He is a patrician from an old family, supposedly living a quiet and satisfying life at his post. He conscientiously fulfils his duties, which are not many: "There is not much crime here and the penalty is usually a fine or compulsory labour"[1] – and spends the rest of his time pursuing hobbies appropriate to his patrician status: hunting, reading the classics, drawing maps of the unknown territories, excavating the ruins of past civilisations (earlier in his life philandering was also included). This man, who stands for the good old ways, is confronted by the newly arrived Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau, which "is the most important division of the Civil Guard" (2), that is, the officer of the security forces of the state. The reason for his arrival is rumours of preparations for war among the barbarians and he appropriately comes from the capital since, as the Magistrate remembers: "Last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the barbarians. […] The barbarian tribes were arming, the rumour went; the Empire should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war" (8). Joll is supposed to investigate

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 2; further references in the body of the text.

the situation and he immediately sits down to torture two prisoners who are in all probability innocent. Such crudity arouses the Magistrate's disgust as his educated belief is that the barbarian threat is just a fantasy of a satiated community:

> Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe. (8)

During the course of the novel, we do not learn much about the barbarians, who are no doubt "mainly destitute tribespeople with tiny flocks living along the river" (4), as the Magistrate maintains, so they do not constitute any danger for the Empire, yet the question remains why once every generation there is a panic about the barbarian invasion if the main preoccupation of those people is how to survive in the wasteland they inhabit. Is it really the outcome of too much leisure in the happy crimeless community?

The answer to this question is provided by the Magistrate himself who, after having led an expedition to return a barbarian girl mutilated by Joll to her tribe, is accused by Warrant Officer Mandel (another figure from the Third Bureau, and to some extent interchangeable with Joll) of "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (77). He answers this charge by saying, "We are at peace here, […] we have no enemies. […] Unless I make a mistake […]. Unless we are the enemy" (77). Rather than translating this ironic remark into a standard accusation of the security forces of having broken the just and lenient imperial law, whose representative the Magistrate is, for their own vile purposes and therefore of being the real enemy of the people, we can follow the Magistrate's further comments on his persecutors where he calls them "the new barbarians usurping *my* desk and pawing *my* papers" (78; emphasis added) and later muses on Mandel's "strange" behaviour:

> The careful reorganisation of my office from clutter and dustiness to this vacuous neatness, the slow swagger with which he uses to cross the room, the measured insolence with which he examines me, are all meant to say something: not only that he is now in

> charge [...] but that he knows how to comport himself in an office, knows even how to introduce a note of functional elegance. Why does he think me worth the trouble of this display? Because despite my smelly clothes and my wild beard I am still from an *old family*, however contemptibly decayed out here in the back of beyond? (82)

The struggle we witness here seems to be the struggle of the Empire with itself and the antagonism inside it is described with precision (though rather deprecatingly) by the Magistrate himself: "The road to the top must be hard for young men without money, without patronage, with the barest of schooling, men who might as easily go into lives of crime as into the service of the Empire" (84). Joll and Mandel are seen as representatives of the dominated classes who no longer want to stay low and whom the ossified hierarchy of the Empire (the old families) cannot contain; the hierarchy either forces them into taking the road of "crime" (that is, activities directed against the status quo) or attempts to contain them by turning them into the *security* police – to maintain the security of the old families against "crime," yet at the same time making them "untouchable," since the measures that have to be taken to maintain security include those that the law in principle does not allow and which are revolting to the liberal consciousness of the old families, who want to see themselves as enlightened, indulgent, pleasure-loving paternal figures. Hence the clash we witness: on the one hand, the Magistrate, as a liberal beautiful soul, is indignant at the practices his happy satiated world supposedly does not need ("We are at peace here"); on the other, the security officers are trained to protect the world of the old families but disavowed as not belonging to this world, or even dangerous to it, yet necessary for its maintenance.

This configuration can explain the mysterious panic that is raised against the barbarians once in a generation: each generation of "untouchables" needs such unrest to overcome the inherent divide within the imperial society and dominate (that is, force their way into) the old families. In other words, what we witness in the supposed war against the barbarians is the outside projection of the antagonism within the imperial society: the war with the real but insignificant barbarians is an instrument used by the new "imperial" barbarians (who lack money, patronage, and education) to gain a position among the rulers by denouncing the old aesthetic ("liberal") habits as dangerous to the Empire – the Empire *they* represent as its most faithful servants.

In this light, it is interesting that the book starts precisely with something that, within the bounds of the Magistrate's world, is tantamount to the entrance of Satan into the Garden of Eden, that is, with the arrival of Joll and his committing the sin of torture – which is conceived as a sin against *humanity* ("We are the great miracle of creation!" shouts the Magistrate later in the novel (107)). Until this moment the Magistrate's life has supposedly been happy and satisfying, which he explicitly says at the beginning of the memoir he writes in the last pages of the novel: "No one who paid a visit to this oasis […] failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvest, of the migrations of the waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth" (154). Although he explicitly qualifies what he has written as "equivocal" ("a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this" (154)), all of his retrospections of the life "before Joll" bear precisely this melancholic stamp of the lost fullness and happiness of existence in the organic community which is at peace with itself and content with living the cyclical time of seasons, while the arrival of Joll is retrospectively summarised as the disaster by which "time has broken" (43); that is, the timeless paradise of the repetitive happy progression of the seasons was lost.[2]

[2] One can even discern a humorous counterplot which parallels the story of life in the Garden of Eden (but since all of Coetzee's books are singularly devoid of humour, we can assume that this specimen is unintentional): while, until the arrival of Joll, the Magistrate was in full control of his penis, distributing it liberally among the attractive female inhabitants of the fort, and with age sublimating part of this power into cultural activities ("For years I wore the well-fed look of the prize boar. Later that promiscuity modulated into more discreet relations with housekeepers and girls lodged sometimes upstairs in my rooms but more often downstairs with the kitchen help, and into the liaisons with girls at the inn. I found that I needed women less frequently; I spent more time on my work, my hobbies, my antiquarianism, my cartography" (45)), the break in time coincides with the loss of control over this part of the body as witnessed by his helplessness in front of the barbarian girl ("It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (58)) and later by random and uncontrollable erections that plague him. As it is well known, man's lack of control over his penis is for Augustine the sign of the Fall, of the expulsion from paradise.

This failure of the organ can also be linked to an altered symbolic organisation of the body which the encounter with Joll (as the master of the body in torture) and later the barbarian girl (Joll's "work") evoke in the Magistrate: "When I look at her naked body and my own, I find it impossible to believe that once upon a time I imagined a human form as a flower radiating from a kernel in the loins. These bodies of her and mine are diffuse, gaseous, centreless, at one moment spinning about a vortex here, at another curdling, thickening elsewhere; but often also flat, blank" (34). The

Therefore, perhaps, there is some reason for the strange lack of any factual information about the Empire, a power about which we never learn anything. Perhaps what we witness in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not a story about some upstarts from the capital, corrupted by power and wreaking havoc in the idyllic (organic) frontier society ruled by a wise and liberal Magistrate, but an allegory about the nature of imperial power itself presented in the microcosm of the frontier fort, a power which always has two faces (the benevolent symbolic father and the obscene enjoyer of torture) and which tells itself stories about the milk-and-honey past to dissimulate the antagonisms within it and project them as a contingent danger invading from the outside. On this reading, there is nothing but truth in Joll's retort to the Magistrate's outraged cry: "*You* are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!" (114); Joll's answer is: "Nonsense. There will be no history, the affair is too trivial." Or rather: your plea will not be included in the history of the Empire because the war with the barbarians is precisely the way the antagonism of our society (the antagonism between the old families and the young upstart jackals) is being narrativised in order to dissimulate it.

Of course, the Magistrate in his more sober moments is conscious of the link that connects him to the security officers as the other face of the Empire: "For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that the Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more no less" (135). But there is a further step one should take here – one may ask: the lie the Empire believes when times are easy for whom? Precisely for those who can feel they live in paradise because of wealth, patronage and plenty of education – for others the indulgent pleasure-loving life is simply inaccessible, and the truth of the Empire for them, regardless of times, is the rigid rule of the Colonel.

Although the Magistrate's relation to himself has to be negotiated by means of his relation to the security officers, the "object" through which this relation is mediated is the barbarian girl who

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confrontation with the girl can be said to dissolve in the Magistrate the genital organisation of the drives, that is, the *hierarchy* of the drives (incarnated in the genital organisation of erogenous zones) based on the successful introduction of the paternal metaphor (the *master* signifier) and returns him to polymorphous sexuality of oral and anal stages in which the genitals (the penis) lose the privileged role.

is tortured and mutilated by Joll and whom the Magistrate takes into his care when the security forces have gone back to the capital. Why does he do it? He insists that he is not able to explain himself in this respect, but one can surmise that his reason (or at least one of them) is guilt: as he allowed torture to happen under his jurisdiction, his liberal conscience seeks now for some kind of expiation for his having lacked the will to prevent the atrocities. Yet the Magistrate's attachment to the girl is much more ambiguous – he becomes fascinated by her, but this fascination has nothing to do with her being the cultural other, that is, with her being as she used to be before she was brought to the fort; he is not interested in her as a barbarian (the barbarians are "primitives" who are uninteresting to a cultured patrician, they are "destitute tribespeople" (4) and when he parts with the girl he realises that he has not even tried to learn her language (72)), but as a "work" of Joll – what draws him to her is her "altered" state. What, however, is so fascinating about a deformed and mutilated body[3] for the Magistrate whose attitude to life is markedly aesthetic in his melancholy pursuit of beauty and harmony in the world?

He finds a message inscribed in the body of the girl, a message whose meaning he has to decipher: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). For the Magistrate, there is a truth inscribed in her body, which demands to be uncovered and understood and whose master is Joll who, at the beginning of the novel, is introduced by the Magistrate precisely in such terms: "This gentleman is visiting us from the capital. […] His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does" (3). And Joll is quite explicit about it himself: "First I get lies […] then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. This is how you get the truth" (5).

The Magistrate attempts to find out this truth, which he conceives as the truth of the victim, by asking the barbarian girl questions about what exactly happened to her behind the closed doors of the torture chamber and, even more importantly, about how such an experience influenced her self ("What do you feel towards the men who did this?" (41)). In other words, he tries to penetrate through the obscure surface of the body marked with enigmatic signs and find "personal" meaning for them in the interiority of the victim. This effort,

[3] During her torture the girl's ankles are broken and she is virtually blinded by hot metal brought close to her eyes.

however, is repeatedly frustrated by the girl, which becomes a source of exasperation: "But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry" (43). What is more, this hunting for truth does not only happen on the level of speech but is accompanied by a wordless everyday ritual that commences by the Magistrate's taking the girl into his quarters to wash her and dress her wounds and later turns into massaging and anointing her body, during which the Magistrate each time passes out and falls unconscious, only to wake up some hours later.

He does not know what to think about such a compulsive ritual, he does not even know what kind of relation it establishes between him and the girl: "There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her. All this erotic behaviour of mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so" (43). One can say that what started clearly as a ritual of cleansing or expiation is given an obscene twist: the act of washing the feet of the barbarian girl can no doubt be related to the feeling of guilt that the Magistrate's weakness of will evoked in his liberal conscience, and hence his "intuitive" passing on to perform a ritual on which he earlier ironically mused in reference to Joll:

> I suppose that, like the roving headsman, he is used to being shunned. […] I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the clean and unclean?" (12)

As there is no question of the Magistrate being a new man (he comes from an *old family*), the ministrations on the body of the barbarian girl may look precisely like this kind of a ritual aiming at getting rid of guilt on the symbolic level, yet there are some features of it that perplex the Magistrate and disallow such a simple assignment of meaning to what happens to him: first, the ritual is compulsory (repetitive); second, it blows his conscious mind away; third, the ritual alternates between producing feelings of pleasure and revulsion, or rather mixes them up so we have pleasure in revulsion or revulsion in pleasure, which introduces confusion in the Magistrate's notions of desire ("Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms" (40)).

Revolting against his bondage to this ritual with the girl,[4] and in order to shake off all the ambiguities it produces about himself and his desire and to become a "normal" man again, the Magistrate visits a "girl" at the inn (one he calls the "bird-girl") to have "unproblematic" sexual intercourse: "I have not for a moment had to interrogate my desire: to desire her meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself" (43). So we are back with interiority, this time easily reached with the girl offering herself as the object of desire. However, this easy and supposedly natural interiority of the beautiful girl of pleasure (so unlike the barbarian who is stocky and shapeless) is of course nothing but artifice in the service of the master, even if it is reflected into itself as belief: "The friend who first recommended her to me spoke of her talents: 'It is all playacting of course,' he said, 'but in her case the difference is that she believes in the role she plays' " (46). So what the Magistrate feels as depth here has nothing to do with the girl's interiority (unless we understand interiority only in the anatomical sense), but with symbolic *distance* between them – although they are copulating each one remains in the place they occupy in the social (symbolic) structure of the society: he as an invading master, she as accommodating female who appropriately stages her submission. In other words, they enjoy but their enjoyment is kept within the bounds of the pleasure principle (that is, it is ultimately undecidable whether it is "real" or staged enjoyment[5]), which leaves the symbolic identifications intact and allows the circulation of desire to be unhindered and unproblematic.

In contrast to this, while he is with the barbarian girl the Magistrate is confronted with his disappearance – massaging her body his ego temporarily disintegrates and he experiences an invasion of some rending substance which is definitely not what he encounters in pursuing his desire with the bird-girl where the pleasure he gets is actually something that strengthens his ego as it strengthens his identification with the image of a lenient pleasure-seeking master

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[4] "There are other times when I suffer fits of resentment against my bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion. I cease to comprehend what pleasure I can ever have found in her obstinate, phlegmatic body, and even discover in myself stirrings of outrage" (41).

[5] This is also the case with the Magistrate: it is a part of the *role* of the "normal" man taking part in "ordinary" sexual intercourse (the intercourse in which the roles of a man and a woman are pre-defined) that he derives "unproblematic" sexual pleasure from it.

(or even lenient *because* pleasure-seeking). What is this suffocating substance that causes his disappearance? Lacanian psychoanalysis calls it *jouissance* (the only substance that exists for psychoanalysis), something that accompanies but at the same time undermines the subject's imaginary and symbolic identifications out of which the conscious ego (which is what in psychology passes for interiority) is constituted and which it cannot really get rid of:

> The trouble with *jouissance* is not that it is unattainable, that it always eludes our grasp, but, rather, that *one can never get rid of it*, that its stain drags along for ever – therein resides the point of Lacan's concept of surplus-enjoyment: the very renunciation of *jouissance* brings about the remainder/surplus of *jouissance*.[6]

To explain the meaning of such surplus[7] we have to go back to the Lacanian notion of the subject, which, as is well-known, is a split, barred subject ($), that is, a subject marked with the symbolic castration in which the subject gives up *jouissance* (e.g. of a part-object like the breast, related to mother's body) to be able to accede to language: what bars the subject is the lack introduced by the paternal No! installed in the place of *jouissance* (of part-object). For the early Lacan (1950s) the outcome of such constitution of the subject is the coming into being of the symbolic position the subject takes (e.g. the Magistrate) and the evacuation of the possibility of *jouissance* reduced to small pleasures obeying the logic of desire which is fundamentally metonymically structured, that is, always moving forward to the next object because "this is not it!" (what psychoanalysis calls the pleasure principle). Since the pleasures are never quite satisfying, they never endanger the subject's position, constituted by his imaginary and symbolic identifications, and precisely for this reason, from the subject's perspective, they can be projected backward as fully satisfying only in the imaginary register of the lost paradise (that is, as absent).

However, in the later development of his theory, Lacan notices the shadow that accompanies such a subject and he comes to call it the object-cause of desire or object *a*. It is something that derails

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[6] Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 93.

[7] The status of this surplus is paradoxical since it is at the same time a lack – but a lack that has *positive* existence (as in a symbolic chain a lack of feature constitutes a positive determination): the lack is not a hole that can be at every moment filled with something.

the smooth course of things, the leftover, the remainder of castration which cannot be included in the chain of signifiers that is the symbolic order: "the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier."[8] In this way, what Lacan now calls subject is split also because it appears in two guises: as S_1, the master signifier, with which the subject identifies, and *a*, the obscene support of his identity which has to be excluded from the image (ideal ego) he projects to appear likable to himself.[9] The important point here is that these two faces of the subject are *mutually exclusive* – the moment one comes to the fore, the other disintegrates:

> Object *a* as a cause is an In-itself that resists subjectivisation/symbolisation, yet far from being "independent from the subject," it is *sensu stricto* the subject's shadow among the objects, a kind of stand-in for the subject, a pure semblance lacking any consistency of its own. In other words, if the subject is to emerge, he must set himself against a paradoxical object that is real and cannot be subjectivised. Such an object remains an "absolute non-subject" whose very presence involves *aphanisis*, the erasure of the subject; yet this presence is as such the subject himself in his oppositional determination, the negative of the subject, a piece of flesh that the subject had to lose if he is to emerge as the void of distance towards every objectivity. This uncanny object is the subject itself in the mode of objectivity, the object which is the subject's absolute otherness precisely insofar as it is closer to the subject than anything that the subject can set against itself in the domain of objectivity.[10]

In the Lacanian context, therefore, the cause of the Magistrate's *aphanisis* may become clearer: in pursuing the meaning of the "signs" left by Joll on the body of the barbarian girl by means of words he always comes to nothing as the truth of these marks can only be found in *jouissance* (that is, outside of language), while the very possibility of his remaining himself (his ego-discourse) is founded on the dissimulation of *jouissance* by retaining the distance between ego and enjoyment which, as we have noted, constitutes interiority itself. On

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[8] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Seminar XI), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), 270.

[9] In other words: what becomes disavowed is surplus-*jouissance* that the taking of the symbolic position, which is the effect of castration, produces.

[10] Slavoj Žižek, "Hegel with Lacan, or the Subject and Its Cause," in: *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, eds. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 400.

the other hand, the confrontation with the "materiality" of the girl's body by means of corporeal contact forces the "truth" of the enjoying/torturing master into the open – there is no truth here, in the sense of a message: to "truthfully" answer the question of the Magistrate ("What do you feel towards the men who did this [or even better: what did you feel…]"?), the answer would have to be the scream of pain in which the interiority ("feelings" that we have "deep down") would be completely evacuated outside into the rending sound leaving nothing remaining inside. In this context, the cruel joke invented by one of the spectators of the Magistrate's torture later in the novel: "That is barbarian language you hear" (121), describing his screams of pain, unexpectedly hits the mark: his screaming *is* barbarian language if we understand it as the medium in which the barbarian truth (of/about the Empire) is told.

This is precisely the lesson of Joll: all the confessions his search for truth produces, if we approach them on the substantial level (of meaning), are fabrications produced by the victims to satisfy his demand. But when we take a different perspective, it will turn out that the appearance of truth corresponds precisely to the *aphanisis* (erasure) of the subject and the appearance of this paradoxical object/non-object *pain* "which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier" as a scream. Therefore, on the one hand, we have the activity that the Magistrate takes up in order to expiate his guilt (with all its Christian connotations of washing feet, etc.), that is, to exorcise obscene enjoyment (of Joll) from the Law whose representative he is by means of sacrificing his elevated status to plug up the crack in the Other[11] through which *jouissance* seeps in and undermines the "objectivity" of Law. Yet, on the other hand, by postulating that the truth has to be excavated from the signs left by Joll (the truth of what it is to be *human*, what it means *to be hurt*), he places himself precisely in the position of Joll (of which he is partly aware[12]), who is a whimsical master supposedly demanding meaning ("Tell me what you barbarians are planning against us"). However, what Joll really demands is ultimately not a message expressed in words but the meaning of what it is to be the master himself, that is, simply fixing him in the position of *absolute* domination (his victim will ultimately tell him *anything* he demands).

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[11] The (big) Other is the Lacanian term for the symbolic order: the realm of signifiers and the Law.

[12] "Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!" (43).

This is also the position taken by the Magistrate, although admittedly outside the extreme context of the torture chamber. As we learn from one of his lovers who used to work with the barbarian girl: "Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. […] She could not understand you. She did not know what you wanted from her" (152). Although the Magistrate is not completely unaware of the girl's confusion, the way he at first speaks about it puts *him* in the position of the victim. When the barbarian girl is still around he muses:

> I prefer not to dwell on the possibility that what a barbarian upbringing teaches a girl may be not to accommodate a man's every whim, including the whim of neglect, but to see sexual passion, whether in horse or goat or man or woman, as a simple fact of life with the clearest of means and the clearest of ends; so that the confused actions of an aging foreigner who picks her up off the streets and instals her in his apartment so that he can now kiss her feet, now browbeat her, now anoint her with exotic oils, now ignore her, now sleep in her arms all night, now moodily sleep apart, may seem nothing but evidences of impotence, indecisiveness, alienation from his desires (56).[13]

Later on in the novel, however, the Magistrate has a moment of clarity in which he confesses the cruelty of his position: "She is marked for life as the property of the stranger [Joll], and no one will approach her save in the spirit of *lugubrious sensual pity* that she detected and rejected in me. No wonder she fell asleep so often, no wonder she was happier peeling vegetables than in my bed! From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt the miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire" (135; emphasis added).[14] In this context, the Magistrate's repeated *aphanisis* may become clearer: in the signs Joll has left on the body of the barbarian girl he encounters himself in his opposite determination, that is, as ob-

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[13] We may note that such doubling up of meaning when the absolute master presents himself as the hurt one is also characteristic of the torture chamber where the torturer may imply that it is all the victim's fault: "It is you who make me do it; if only you confessed…"

[14] Some authors speak in this context about Coetzee's questioning of "liberal fetishization of victimhood" [David Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 80]; a similar point is also raised by Dovey [Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1988)].

ject *a*, the obscene surplus-*jouissance* of the master, which, as we have noted, is incompatible with his symbolic identification as the Magistrate and hence in such confrontation his ego has to go, even if only temporarily.

Moreover, in the repeated dream the Magistrate has of the girl building a castle of snow she appears precisely as object *a* – a shapeless smear which because it has no place in the symbolic order produces only an obscure feeling of revulsion at the object "not meant to live in the light" (53). In the first occurrences of the dream the face is simply hidden[15]; then, when it is encountered, it appears as something revolting: "The face I see is blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin" (37). It is difficult to find a more pertinent image to represent object *a*, the part-object which is and at the same time is not an "organ," a part of the body,[16] the object that has no specular image.[17] It is not difficult to explain the revulsion felt at this object, which is "obtuse, slick, like an internal organ" (53), especially if we take into consideration the Magistrate's dream that follows the one in which the castle-building girl appears for the first time. While the first appearance of the girl is situated within the ambience of whiteness and cold,[18] the next one constitutes its "luxuriant" counterpart (golden and sweet): "I […] dream of a body lying spread on its back, a wealth of pubic hair glistening liquid black and gold across the belly, up the loins, and down like an arrow into the furrow of the legs. When I stretch out a hand to brush

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[15] In the novel, the yet-unrecognised girl building the snow castle appears for the first time in the Magistrate's dream seemingly *before* the barbarian prisoners including her and her father are brought in and tortured by Joll, which would support our suggestion that the Magistrate retroactively projects the past state of things, as with the image of the oasis as Paradise.

[16] The original part-object is the breast, yet ultimately the part-object is what does not allow for the subject's illusion of completeness.

[17] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 693: "A common characteristic of these objects as I formulate them is that they have no specular image, in other words no alterity. This is what allows them to be the 'stuff' or, better put, the lining – without nevertheless being the flip side – of the very subject people take to be the subject of consciousness."

[18] Dovey takes her cue from Lacan in interpreting the castle of the dream ("the formation of the *I* is symbolised in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium" – 224) and one may incline to this interpretation taking into consideration that the castle is cold and empty of life ("You must put people there!" exclaims the Magistrate (53)), that is, it represents the realm of the signifier from which life (*jouissance*) is evacuated and that the girl (object *a*) is nevertheless the creative force behind it (she is building it).

the hair it begins to writhe. It is not hair but bees clustered densely atop one another: honey-drenched, sticky, they crawl out of the furrow and fan their wings" (13). We can almost say that what we have here is a dream reworking of the famous painting of Courbet, "The Origin of the World," the very attempt to represent the Thing itself (the substance of *jouissance*) where the "unacceptable" image of the aroused female genitalia is "decently" covered over with bees (and therefore disavowed), yet, paradoxically, this very cover itself starts to function as a metaphoric representation of the crawling, slimy, sticky, revolting (and yet "sweet") life substance that it is supposed to hide – the image of the swarming honey-drenched bees.

Although the girl finally receives an imaginary face in the dream ("she is herself, herself as I have never seen her" (53)), this happens precisely at the moment the Magistrate "decides"[19] to exclude her from his life (that is, dissimulate his object *a*) and from the territory under his jurisdiction to be able to return to his old ways of balanced pleasure which he finds impossible when the girl is around. Although his effort to return her to her tribe is presented as an act of decency instigated by "respect for the Other" ("Would you not like to see your sisters again?" (53)), even the Magistrate, later reflecting on his actions, does not delude himself that it was possible to heal the girl's wounds this way: "However kindly she may be treated by her own people, she will never be courted and married in a normal way: she is marked for life as the property of a stranger" (135). There is no returning to the imaginary balance which once supposedly existed, or at least this kind of "respect" is not the way to reach it.

Here we can return to the Magistrate's attempted reading of the signs left on the girl's body by Joll. As we have noted, what makes the Magistrate Joll's accomplice in *jouissance* is the position he takes in respect of the girl: he wants to penetrate her surface in order to find the hidden meaning of Joll's inscription "inside" her. Moreover, he is infuriated and disgusted by the fact that the girl is nothing but surface and interprets it as her *resistance* in exactly the same way the torturer had done. Yet, as happens many times in the novel, the Magistrate has a presentiment of a much less obscene position he could have taken, although he never follows his thoughts to their necessary conclusion. Reflecting back on what happened to the girl he muses:

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[19] The decision is never mentioned by him explicitly, but five pages later (58) in the novel they set out on the road. Therefore the imaginary "healing" of the girl's image in the dream announces a decision not yet consciously taken.

> They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them […]. Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible for her. I too, if I live long enough in this cell with its ghosts not only of the father and the daughter but of the man who even by lamplight did not remove the black discs from his eyes and the subordinate whose work it was to keep the brazier fed, will be touched with the contagion and turned into *a creature that believes in nothing*. (81; emphasis added)

This is precisely the statement of the truth about the girl, the meaning of the marks on her body. In other words, she had been through something which made her die symbolically and left her blank and empty of all the values she had believed in and taken for granted as well as of the image she had had of herself as the subject of these values. Therefore all her interiority is gone and what remains is only a blank surface, which can be re-marked by anybody with anything ("She yields to everything" (30)). She is void of all values but, in her own eyes, also lacking all value herself ("You do not want someone like me," she says to the Magistrate (27)). Rather than accepting this as self-evident, the Magistrate becomes infatuated with what he conceives as the "mystery of the other," but which ultimately has nothing to do with the girl but amounts to a fascination with himself in his opposite determination (the fascination with the *jouissance* of the other, which is in this case the imperial *jouissance* incarnated in Joll). In other words, what he conceives as the girl's interiority is ultimately the fake image produced in *his* mind by Joll's ministrations. No wonder, then, that such prostration before the imaginary otherness is precisely what produces the girl's unhappiness: in her own eyes she is nobody, a worthless piece of slime; therefore she needs somebody in whose eyes she would be able to build her symbolic identifications, her beliefs, anew. Therefore, the best thing the Magistrate could have done would have been to treat the girl like an ordinary loved woman, which would have allowed her to reconstruct her own worth by means of assuming her image reflected in the loving other's eyes.[20] Whereas, in the way she is treated by the

[20] As there is obviously no "normalcy" common to the Magistrate and the girl (since they come from different cultures), what is meant here by "normal" is what this term signifies in the Magistrate's liberal discourse. In the context of her utter subjective destitution, the accusation that treating the girl like an ordinary loved woman he would be forcing on her his own system of values, thus being a "colonialist," is meaningless. This also includes having sex with her, which would be far from

Magistrate, the image that is reflected back to her from his eyes is precisely the image she has already seen in the dark lenses of Joll: " 'That is not how you do it,' she should have said, stopping me in the act. 'If you want to learn how to do it, ask your friend with the black eyes.' Then she should have continued, so as not to leave me without hope: 'But if you want to love me you will have to turn your back on him and learn your lesson elsewhere' " (135).[21]

This confusion between the Magistrate's liberal beliefs and his fascination with imperial *jouissance* brings him to commit a thoroughly "liberal" and at the same time a thoroughly ridiculous gesture: he takes the barbarian girl beyond the boundaries of the Empire and when they meet the barbarian tribe which agrees to take her back to her family, he asks her to come back with him *out of her own free will*, forgetting that what could be conceived as her will had been destroyed by Joll in the first place ("she yields to everything") and, even if it had not been, the notion of free will is precisely the product of his liberal discourse which may be difficult to grasp for a "tribal" barbarian – in order to understand the meaning of his act she would have had to rebuild her symbolic order modelling it on the discourse of the Magistrate, which is precisely what he did not allow her to do. Thus, even his final gesture towards the girl obeys the logic of his former behaviour in relation to her: by asking her to come back he presents her with a demand she is not able to understand and therefore cannot answer.

Having failed to achieve it when the girl is around, the Magistrate's second attempt at expiation begins with the act in which he denounces that which invalidated the purgatory attempt in his ritual with the girl. Although after his return from the expedition to meet the barbarians he is imprisoned by the functionaries of the Third Bureau, he is not treated very badly at first. His real ordeal commences when he steps out of the crowd in order to prevent the pub-

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taking advantage of his position with respect to the girl: rejection as sexual partner is precisely what produces her confusion and humiliation: " 'You visit other girls,' she whispers. 'You think I do not know? [...] Do you also treat them like this?' she whispers and tries to sob" (55).

[21] Joll's spell is broken only once when it is already too late: on the way to return the girl to the barbarians the Magistrate is at long last able to make love to her precisely when he sees her reflected in the eye of the Other (the soldiers that accompany them) as an *ordinary* spirited woman, which finally (or temporarily?) erases her image as an ineffable mystery: "The banter goes on in the pidgin of the frontier, and she is at no loss for words. I am surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession. I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman!" (63).

lic festival of tormenting the barbarian prisoners that Joll organises and encourages people (including children) to take part in, that is, when he takes the position of the (dead) letter of the Law against the obscene enjoying master:

> "*No!*" I hear the first word from my throat, rusty, not loud enough. Then again: "*No!*" This time the word rings like a bell from my chest. […] I am in the arena holding up my hands to still the crowd: "*No! No! No!*"
>
> When I turn to Colonel Joll he is standing not five paces from me, his arms folded. I point a finger at him. "*You!*" I shout. Let it all be said. Let him be the one on whom the anger breaks. "You are depraving these people!" (106)

The consequences of this act are predictable – the Magistrate is taken through a series of humiliating and painful exercises which culminate in torture when he is hoisted into the air by a rope attached to his hands which are bound behind his back ("now we will show you another form of flying," says the torturing officer, Mandel (121)). Such public disavowal of the imperial *jouissance* seems to produce in the Magistrate the effect that the ritual with the girl was unable to perform, since immediately after this act of courage, the girl visits him in a dream in a completely different shape and offers him the bread of reconciliation:

> She is wearing a round cap embroidered in gold. Her hair is braided in a heavy plait which lies over her shoulder: there is gold thread worked into the braid. "Why are you dressed in your best?" I want to say: "I have never seen you looking so lovely." She smiles at me: what beautiful teeth she has, what clear jet-black eyes! Also now I can see that what she is holding out to me is a loaf of bread, still hot, with a coarse streaming broken crust. A surge of gratitude sweeps through me. "Where did a child like you learn to bake so well in the desert?" I want to say. I open my arms to embrace her, and come to myself with tears stinging the wound on my cheek. (109)[22]

So what the Magistrate was not able to accomplish on the level of interpersonal relations with the girl seems finally to be reached by recourse to the logic of the heroic deed by which the protagonist not

[22] When the Magistrate muses on the psychology of the torturer his thoughts go precisely in this direction: "I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification […] to enable him to break bread with other men" (12).

only shows his moral superiority opposing injustice but also willingly takes on the just punishment for his past misdeeds and therefore even in his humiliation becomes victorious.

This, however, seems to be a narrative model that Coetzee wants to avoid, making the Magistrate repeatedly proclaim: "In my opposition there is nothing heroic – let me not for an instant forget that" (78), and at every turn emphasising how, by being submitted to the regime of Mandel, the Magistrate becomes reduced to just "a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy" (85). What the security officers do to the Magistrate is ironically called by him "showing me the meaning of humanity" which includes not only demonstrations that the will is weak when the body is tortured but also that in order to live a human being will bear every degradation: "Is there a point at which I will lie down and say, 'Kill me – I would rather die than go on'? Sometimes I think I am approaching that point, but I am always mistaken" (117). Therefore, the supposedly anti-heroic conclusion that "there is no consoling grandeur in any of this" (117) is carefully prepared for reasons that, as Dovey has pointed out,[23] Coetzee himself elaborates in the essay "Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex la Guma":

> A favored mode among white South African writers has been tragedy […]. The overt content of the fable here is that love conquers evil through tragic suffering when such suffering is borne witness to in art; its covert content is the apolitical doctrine that defeat can turn itself, by the twist of tragedy, into victory. The tragic hero is the scapegoat who takes our punishment. By his suffering he performs a ritual of expiation, and as we watch in sympathy our emotions are purged, as Aristotle noted, through the operations of pity and terror. […] Religious tragedy reconciles us to the inscrutable dispensation by giving a meaning to suffering and defeat. As tragic art it also confers immortality: Oedipus and Lear may be destroyed by the gods but we resurrect them ritually on our stage. […] Religious tragedy is apolitical or quietistic.[24]

Is, however, the story of the Magistrate's suffering taken beyond the space of what Coetzee calls religious tragedy? Dovey suggests that it is, because "suffering and defeat have no *meaning* here, provide no aura of transcendence, and […] the Magistrate moves from

[23] Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, 233–34.

[24] J. M. Coetzee, "Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex la Guma," in: *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 346–47.

the position of 'sight' to a position of 'blindness.' "[25] One can wonder, however, whether the very fact that at the end of the novel we return to its beginning does not introduce precisely such transcendence through the back door and against the will of the author: although the fort becomes impoverished and supposedly faces hard times in the winter, the Magistrate, no matter how "symbolically impoverished," is again in command and the inhabitants "naturally" fall back into the habit of obeying his rule. The outcome is that, in spite of his being humiliated and tortured, his symbolic authority survives and with it the idea of the Empire his authority represents, that is, the benevolent rule of "decent" old families. For it is precisely here that we can find the precious object for which he sacrificed himself. Although from time to time he complains about being unable to name the cause for which he suffers ("I walked into that cell a sane man sure of the rightness of my cause, however incompetent I continue to find myself to describe what that cause may be" (95)),[26] on other occasions he has no problem of voicing it quite clearly: "I should never have allowed the gates of the town to be opened to people who assert there are higher considerations than those of *decency*" (81; emphasis added).

And this is precisely the "public" reason (in addition to his "private" need for expiation) that makes it necessary for him to repeat his No! to Joll in front of the whole population of the fort, in other words for the eye of the Other.[27] Knowing what the outcome of such public denouncement will be, he nevertheless sacrifices himself in order that the idea of the decent Empire should be incarnated in the scene and remain engraved in the minds and memory of the people. Thus, he sacrifices himself to show to the imperial subjects that rather than being nothing other than just an obscene perpetration of the *jouissance* of power for the exercise of the power itself (incarnated in functionaries of the Third Bureau who do not obey any rules and are named "barbarians" precisely because of that), there exists the *pure* idea of Empire which ultimately stands for Universal Justice and the guardians of which are the old imperial families. In other words, the Magistrate's aim is to show that rather than being

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[25] Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, 235. She is referring to the "enigmatic" way the Magistrate sums up the meaning of his story: "There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it" (155).

[26] The parallel to not being able to find out what he wanted from the girl is, of course, not accidental.

[27] The Magistrate has already voiced his "private" No! to his oppressors, calling them the new barbarians and expressing his outrage to them.

just a name for the exercise of power, the Empire does and *must* exist. His position in this respect is signalled by a change of register up to the level of universals:

> Godlike strength is mine. In a minute it will pass: let me use it while it lasts! "Look!" I shout. I point to the four prisoners who lie docilely on the earth […] hoping that their punishment is at an end. I raise my broken hand to the sky. "Look!" I shout. "We are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself! How –!" Words fail me. "Look at these men!" I recommence. "*Men!*" (107)

Therefore, in his speech, the Magistrate is not only the representative of the Law (the symbolic father) who is disgusted with the excessive enjoyment that its functionaries and its subjects derive from implementing it (in this case, tormenting the barbarian prisoners), but the representative of Justice itself, which is not a set of particular laws dealing with the behaviour of particular men, but the *transcendental* foundation of the law which answers to the *transcendental* idea of Man. This difference between Justice and law is explained to the reader by the Magistrate himself on the example of a prisoner who had been brought before him in the times "before Joll":

> I think of the young peasant who was once brought before me in the days when I had jurisdiction over the garrison. He had been committed to the army for three years by a magistrate in a far-off town for stealing chickens. After a month here he tried to desert. He was caught and brought before me. He wanted to see his mother and his sisters again, he said. "We cannot just do as we wish," I lectured him. "We are all subject to the law, which is greater than any of us. […] You feel that it is unjust, I know, that you should be punished for having the feelings of a good son. You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know. […] But we live in a world of laws, […] a world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade." (138–39)

Here we can note that an idea of Justice as something in the law that is more than the law is yet another incarnation of the idea of an Empire that is more than its functionaries (who may appear to enjoy their functions too much) and institutions (which may appear as cold and "inhuman") and whose "surplus" of meaning (this inexplicable "more") is incarnated in decent old families who are revolted by

the "new barbarians." Therefore, when the Magistrate speaks about his (symbolic) death[28] or when he insists on his subjective destitution ("There is no consoling grandeur in any of this"), we are strictly speaking on the *aesthetic* (that is, imaginary) level on which the humiliations the Magistrate undergoes do not make him reformulate who he is with respect to his torturers but only offend his good taste; he is ashamed because he feels nothing but hunger ("higher feelings" are gone) or because he does all kinds of humiliating things in order to survive, but these things are perceived as shameful only by the eye of the patrician whose whole life so far has been removed from the experience of necessity and deprivation familiar to other imperial subjects.[29] Therefore, the Magistrate is far from dying a symbolic death on the tree where he is taught to "fly" – although the image of himself he might have had as master of his life is destroyed and he no longer thinks he is unable to do certain shameful things which are necessary for survival in the conditions he finds himself, his symbolic identification with the position of decent authority (which ultimately guarantees his own decency, in spite of all humiliations) does not change at all and hence he himself can easily and without effort slip back into his old function of exercising authority.[30] For this reason, *Waiting for the Barbarians* ultimately turns out to be a specimen of the aforementioned "religious tragedy," since the very act of the Magistrate's sacrifice creates an illusion of healing transcendence: if there is a functionary who in the name of necessary Justice opposes the excesses of the contingent law, the idea of moral greatness (of Man, of the Empire, etc.) perverted by some of

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[28] "I am not a young man any more, and whatever future I had in this place is in ruins. […] Also I have already died one death, on that tree, only you [Mandel] decided to save me" (125).

[29] As usual, "theoretically speaking" the Magistrate is not unaware of this when he claims "a body […] can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well" (115).

[30] In this context, we can refer to a protagonist created by another writer famous for his propagation of the idea of good old common (and English) decency, a protagonist who finds himself in a similar situation to that of the Magistrate but who really dies his symbolic death. When Winston Smith in George's Orwell's *1984* shouts in the torture chamber "Do it to Julia!" he identifies with his torturer, and *this* amounts to his subjective destitution – this act brings about the disintegration of his master signifier (the position in the symbolic order with which he identified and which endorsed the values of decency, love, etc.) and Winston is confronted with his own "lack of grandeur." It is only by means of such destruction of the former symbolic identifications (in the case of the Magistrate it would be abandoning his identification with ineffable Justice) that a novel of this type can move beyond "religious tragedy."

its corrupt servants is saved – no matter what humiliations they will force on the representative of this ideal, the shame in the eye of the Other (which is also the eye of the *Reader*) will ultimately be visited on their heads, since the (liberal) Other *knows* that the flesh is weak and that there are limits to endurance beyond which this fragile creature called man cannot go.

But there is one more unpleasant step finally to be taken. Because decency is the value by means of which the old families legitimate their rule, is not the Magistrate's identification with *ineffable* Justice, a transcendence originating the fallible law, just another way of introducing through the back door the shadow double that always accompanies and perverts the law, that is, the unspeakable substance of enjoyment?

Life and Times of Michael K (1983)

The main protagonist of *Life and Times of Michael K* is a special case in Coetzee's oeuvre because he is the only one who is a coloured South African, as his hospital charge sheet in Prince Albert seems to indicate: "Michael Visagie [the authorities mistake his surname] – CM [coloured male] – 40 – NFA – Unemployed."[1] What is more, he is not a "random" representative of the oppressed, because his deprivation is complete: apart from his racial handicap he is also slow-witted and hare-lipped, which makes him disabled on all possible fronts: social, intellectual, and physical. According to certain critics, this condition puts Michael K within the bounds of a tradition which would suggest a certain "compassionate" reading of him: "Michael K is the descendant of those figures who, in the context of white South African writing, represent the oppressed, handicapped, illiterate, if not inarticulate, victims of the system; the type of figure that appears to offer the writer the opportunity for telling a story, for articulating an experience which, by virtue of the illiterate or inarticulate condition of the victim, would otherwise remain untold."[2] In 1983 when the novel was published, however – after at least twenty years of critical assault on the mimetic mode of writing, which contested its "reality" – such a convention obviously would not do and the author clearly forestalls prospective accusations by introducing into the narrative an additional and "reverse" perspective, making

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 96; further references in the body of the text.

[2] Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1988), 265.

his Michael the descendant of another well-known but totally non-realist tradition – that of Kafka's Ks.[3]

Within the postcolonial critical context, the white author who attempts to give voice to the oppressed can be accused of many trespasses, from his inability to feel what the victim, coming from a totally different life-world, feels (as empathy obviously has its limits) to the smuggling, even if unintentionally, of the oppressive ideological apparatus, in the form of his values, into the narrative under the guise of compassion. Moreover, even the very act of narrating can be presented as betraying the oppressed, as their suffering is made to fit narrative conventions – the writer has to transform the "raw material" of suffering and social injustice into a narration which should be interesting, aesthetically stimulating, etc. to the reader. As Dovey puts it: "Scaling down the perspective, apparently reducing the narrative tone to that of the protagonist, but at the same time organizing what is told in the sequential form of a story, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, this mode of narration simultaneously appropriates for itself the authenticity and authority of the Real."[4] Coetzee, however, is too clever a writer to use this convention without second thoughts, that is, without showing its ugly stitching:

> They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learned storytelling in Huis Norenius instead of potato-peeling and sums, if they had made me practice the story of my life every day, standing over me with a cane till I could perform without stumbling, I might have known how to please them. I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. When my story was finished, people would have shaken their heads and been sorry and angry and plied me with food and drink; women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me in the dark. (247)

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[3] This is obviously not the only gesture. Among others, one can note setting the novel into the future (or rather a temporality which in 1983 was neither the past nor the present of South Africa, and thus indicating the future) and a strong allegorical, or at least metaphorical, tendency, which is often taken to be a trait of Kafka's, too.

[4] Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, 271. She discusses the "bad faith" of this convention in detail.

Such a self-conscious textual gesture seems to imply that Coetzee knows full well what he is doing, that is, he is consciously subverting the conventions in which the story of the monkey is usually told. This way, according to Dovey, he seems to circumvent in advance the accusations that a simple-hearted reader may come up with, which can be exemplified by Nadine Gordimer's reading of the book:

> Your can shake your head decently over yet another evocation of commonplace misery; the only particular reaction, this time, a slight sense of impatience – did it all have to be laid on so thick? Does the man have to be harelipped, etc., on top of everything else?[5]

But, none the less, one may ask oneself if her objections are really so simple-hearted, because it is not only Michael who is "laid on so thick"; there is also something much more unsettling than characterisation bordering on caricature (which can be assigned to the obvious allegorising intention palpable in the narrative[6]), something Gordimer also complains about, that is, the ultimate value of inaction the main protagonist seems to represent (the book "denies the energy of the will to resist evil"[7]) and his "ecological" message: "Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her."[8]

In a world which is plunged into a veritable civil war by which everybody is somehow affected (the army fighting the insurgents, conscription, riots in towns, curfew, shortages of jobs and food, camps for vagrants, dysfunctional public services, etc.), Michael's idea of gardening seems to be a rather pathetic solution: "Enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive,

[5] Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," review of *Life and Times of Michael K, The New York Review of Books*, 2 Feb. 1984, 3. Quoted in Dovey, 267.

[6] Gordimer, in saying that "the initial probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer, and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka" (Gordimer, 3) is obviously wrong as, for instance, the allegorising tendency and the omnipresence of absurd violence are characteristic features of both *Michael K* and Kafka's novels. Moreover, denying such an obvious literary allusion in the work of the writer whose other writings are often founded on intertextual references (*Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg*) is implausible. Even if one may claim that Coetzee's "obviously" intertextual works were written after *Michael K*, it would be foolhardy to maintain that *Waiting for the Barbarians* (the novel written just before *Michael K*) has nothing to do with Cavafy's famous poem of that title.

[7] Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," 6.

[8] Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," 6.

or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord is broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (150). And Michael is supposed to keep this idea alive by dropping out of historical time (history also being a kind of narration) whenever he can: "He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time" (82), "He did not know what month it was, though he guessed it was April. He had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon. He was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out" (157–58). Michael is no Robinson Crusoe; his withdrawal from linear, "eschatological" history is voluntary. He seems to feel much more at home in the time of seasons, which is supposed to release him from the linear time in which the war is taking place. Moreover, this immersion in cyclical, repetitive time is, by a trick of metonymy, presented as more "natural": since the time which Nature observes is the cycle of extinction and regeneration, such an approach to time is also presented as more "natural," more in tune with human needs and therefore more *liberating*.

On the Visagie farm, Michael is subject to almost mystical experiences: "As he moved about his field he felt a deep joy in his physical being. His step was so light that he barely touched the earth. It seemed possible to fly; it seemed possible to be both body and spirit" (139). There, for the first time in his life, he no longer feels himself to be a prisoner ("his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out"). What has been his prison so far, then? Obviously, the social order in which he is disabled in all possible ways, and to be released from it is precisely how freedom is defined in the book:

> I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid in the end. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple. They were locking up simpletons before they locked up anyone else. Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and people with little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street-girls, camps for people who can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in the mountains and blow up bridges in the night. Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. (248)

This formulation is another point about which Gordimer has reservations, saying: "Freedom is defined [only] negatively: it is to be 'out

of all the camps at the same time.' "[9] But, in fact, as we have noted, there is nothing negative about it, if the last sentence is read against Michael's life on the farm which is for him, at least for the time being, precisely the place out of all the camps at the same time. In other words, to be free of all the camps is to leave behind the wasteful universe of war and adopt a balanced ecological stance living in accordance with nature's cycles.

Things, however, are not that simple, because life on the farm, apart from all the rhetoric of happiness and abundance, does not seem to do Michael much good – when he is found by soldiers (who, taking him away, destroy the farm for good), he is so exhausted that he has problems with moving and even with thinking clearly, because he is almost dying of malnutrition. What is more, nobody in the novel claims that "the time for gardening [is] when the war [is] over," as Michael suggests, excusing himself from this scenario ("whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening") – virtually *everybody* seems to be of Michael's opinion that it is best to be out of all the camps at the same time, including the Visagies' grandson, who is a deserter from the army ("There is a war going on, there are people dying. Well, I am in war with no one. I have made my peace. Do you understand? I make my peace with everyone. There is no war here on the farm" (88)), as well as the army officers *who run the camps themselves*, like the medical officer and the commandant of Kenilworth camp, who do not believe in the war either and would rather return to their previous lives as pharmacist and retired officer. (Also a guard in Jakkalsdrif camp says: "The day I get orders to go north [to the front] I walk out. They'll never see me again. It's not my war. Let them fight it, it's their war" (118)). The medical officer's ruminations on the universe of history in which one remains in abeyance, although presented as an example of difference between Michael (untouched by history, living the "fullness" of time) and himself (a historical being living in empty time), bear an uncanny resemblance to Michael's idea of cyclic universe: "War-time is a time of waiting, Noël [the commander of Kenilworth camp] once said. What was there to do in the camp but wait, going through the motions of living, fulfilling one's obligations, keeping an ear turned all the time to the hum of the war beyond walls, listening for its pitch to change? […] to me, listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life and with the other to the suprasensual spinning of the

[9] Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," 6.

gyroscopes of the Grand Design, time has grown empty" (216–17). The medical officer lives like Michael from day to day, obeying the same schedule of repetitive activities. The difference between him and Michael is the lack of *enjoyment* in the activities (for Michael all repetitive activities bring satisfaction: "He liked the leisureliness of the work [repairing fences] and its repetitiveness" (130)) brought about by the officer's redoubled perspective: he feels trapped within repetitive actions by history because it does not allow him freedom to do what he would like to do, but history itself is perceived by the medical officer as Nature (the Grand Design): a cosmic intelligence that has to run its course on its own so that the balance is brought back by forces beyond his grasp. And his intimations do not deceive him: Nature is precisely the realm of utter unfreedom: its laws are iron whatever the subjective attitude may be – in other words, no amount of enjoyment can save you from death by starvation. While it is precisely the realm of history in which freedom (as social relations and the possibility of change) takes its place. The Grand Design as enslaving is the same kind of fantasy as Nature as liberating.[10]

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[10] This confusion between Nature and History is already present in the epigraph to the novel, taken from Heraclitus:

> War is the father of all and king of all.
> Some he shows as gods, others as men
> Some he makes slaves, and others free.

At first glance, in the context of a novel which presents the world in its totality plunged into war, such a motto could be treated as a pessimistic statement on human nature as inevitably aggressive and evil: humans are fallen creatures marked with destructive instincts and they will never learn. In this context, Michael – being "poor in spirit," unblemished by the original sin of desire ("It is difficult to be kind […] to a person who wants nothing" (244), he is told) – would be understood as a new Adam trying to return to the original Paradise (his mother's, mother's mother's, mother's mother's mother's… farm), that is, trying to escape war as a product of the excess that destroyed the original balance, yet unable to reach it because its existence is mythical (the product of fantasy), which is represented as infinite regression: mother's mother's mother's… In Michael's "pocket outside time," time runs in both directions simultaneously: "I want to live here, he thought: I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived" (135) – the "forever," however, runs in the opposite direction than indicated: "He closed his eyes and tried to recover in his imagination the mud-brick and reed roof of her stories, the garden of prickly pear, the chickens scampering for the feed scattered by the little barefoot girl. And behind that child, in the doorway, her face obscured by shadow, he searched for a second woman, the woman from whom his mother had come into the world. […] I come from a line of children without end" (160–61).

However, the epigraph comes from *The Cosmic Fragments* and can be understood as referring to Heraclitus's cosmology which he also summarises in this way: "We must recognize that war is common and strife is justice, and all things happen

As we have already noted, this kind of "thickness" with an (ecological) moral can be taken as a convention, which is from time to time subverted by the narrative itself, and this creates a possibility some critics would hold on to. This approach would be an extension of the "compassionate" attitude but with a twist: since, as has been demonstrated hundreds of times in works of criticism, giving a voice to the victim always results in using the victim for the author's own ends (another kind of exploitation), the writer may accomplish a more sophisticated feat with a representative of the oppressed and attempt to show how the victim is an inaccessible other, at least concerning his meaning within the authorial narrative.

This approach seems to be suggested by Coetzee himself when, in the final address of the medical officer to Michael (who is already outside the camp), he describes his ward as having a meaning akin to the Derridean trace: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know the word. It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you not notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?" (228) The figure of the medical officer may therefore stand for the writer himself, the one who by means of his narrative constructs a contraption which attempts to introduce to the reader the character Michael K (heavily overdetermined as victim: coloured, slow-witted, hare-lipped), show the world in which he is victimised as well as the victim's reaction to this world (rejection of food in the camp), but withhold the meaning of such act as not being containable within the novelistic narrative because it cannot be expressed by Michael himself as he is, that is, illiterate and simple-minded (unable to theorise about himself: "I am not clever with words," he says (190)). The search for Michael's meaning can only be pursued by the medical officer, by a cultured (novel-reading, novel-writing) representative of the white discourse who is

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according to strife and necessity" (DK22B80). Here war may stand for conflict that permits change, therefore war is tantamount not to death but to life itself. This conflict can be understood in two ways: one natural, another historical. The first one is usually associated with "balanced" cyclical time: everything changes in order to remain the same (to repeat itself). The second one with social antagonism which is irresolvable and which permits change – history appears here as one great social unrest; in other words, war is tantamount to freedom in the second understanding. Michael's life as a gardener on the farm may be taken as the happy life in the Garden of Eden, but from this garden one important element is missing: there is no Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; that is, there is no Prohibition – *everything* that he does on the farm is good (because it is satisfying), but this good cannot really be distinguished from evil (he almost dies there).

well disposed towards the victim. Yet, because of the insurmountable difference between their horizons of meaning, their understandings can never meet and so the medical officer's search can only perceive Michael's meaning as a trace always already evacuated to some other place for which the officer's metaphor is "the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life" (228). And as the desert is the metaphoric space of endless straying, of wandering without reaching one's destination, the garden is placed in the pleonastic location of "nowhere and everywhere except for the camps" (228), since in the novel, as we have already seen, there are no places which do not belong to some kind of camp, because society as such consists exclusively of camps (or discourses, since, for example charity is also a camp: "I have escaped the camps; perhaps if I lie low, I will escape charity too" (249)). In other words, "This is a snake which swallows its own tail, for the meaning of this text is that its meaning cannot be reduced to this meaning! That is to say, the meaning which this text conveys via the figure of K cannot be reduced to a term in the system which the novel itself inevitably constitutes."[11]

This approach seems to be confirmed even by Coetzee's critical stance towards a literary source which appears to be of particular importance for *Michael K.* In his article "Time, Tense, and Aspect in Kafka's 'The Burrow,' " Coetzee presents an interpretation of this story as a metaphor for a struggle with something unrepresentable (time) which nevertheless, by means of authorial effort, leaves an enigmatic trace (of the failed struggle with time) which seems to lack any meaning (or to be its own meaning), as the last sentence of the essay suggests:

> Now that the narrator has failed time and again to domesticate time by using strategies of narrative (that is, strategies belonging to historical time), his structures of sequence, of cause and effect, collapsing each time at the "decisive moment" of rupture when the past fails to run smoothly into the present, that is, now that the construct of narrative time has collapsed, there is only the time of narration left, the shifting *now* within which his narrative takes place, leaving behind it a wake (a text) of failure, fantasy, sterile speculation: the ramifications of a burrow whose fatal precariousness is signalled by the whistling that comes from its point(s) of rupture.[12]

[11] Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, 315.

[12] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 231–32.

Since in our case the unrepresentable is not something so abstract and, in a sense, indifferent as time but the very experience of the victim, which by an authorial ruse seems to be presented as always already withdrawing from his grasp, the otherness of Michael K can be declared respected and the author's construction praised as a liberal achievement.

What, however, can we say about the meaning of the presence in *Michael K* of extended allusions to Kafka if we approach them head on, that is, unmediated by Coetzee's critical writing? And what about all the other rather sinister implications (intertextual and otherwise) we have already noted?

As we have already tried to show, the ecological lesson often taken to be the message of *Michael K* is of dubious standing already within the limits of the narrative itself. But if one wants to question such a reading further, there is, of course, a famous literary parallel to be made. Because the very title of the book, *Life and Times of Michael K*, is so formulated that it brings to mind novels of the eighteenth century (*The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*; *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, etc.),[13] we can relate its plot to another book of that century in which gardening and misfortune feature strongly, namely Voltaire's *Candide*. As is known, *Candide* consists of a series of most horrible and cruel events that the main protagonists endure, which are to serve the purpose of both satirising the famous dictum from Leibniz's *Theodicy* that we live our life in the best of all possible words and presenting a panorama of the times. As with Michael K, Candide travels through a world which seems to have been taken over by a war of everybody against everybody else and after many (mis)adventures settles on an estate near Constantinople to offer the reader a flabbergasting solution to how to deal with the presence of evil in the world, much in the spirit of the ecological reading of Coetzee's novel – his famous message to his friends is: "let us cultivate our garden." This is the advice Candide adopts from a Turkish farmer who takes pride in absenting himself from historical time ("I never knew the name of any mufti, or vizier breathing. I am entirely ignorant of the event you speak of; I presume that in general such as are concerned in public affairs sometimes come to a miser-

[13] In an interview with Elżbieta Oleksy, Coetzee even admits that the episode with the two thieves outside Cape Town was inspired by Henry Fielding (*Literatura na Świecie*, 10 (183)/1986, 191).

able end; and that they deserve it: but I never inquire what is doing at Constantinople"), and takes refuge in the cycles of nature claiming this to be the cure for what is wrong with the world: "I have no more than twenty acres of ground, […] the whole of which I cultivate myself with the help of my children; and our labor keeps off from us three great evils – idleness, vice, and want." Yet hard work that saves one from desiring and thinking cannot but be a rather satiric answer to the omnipresence of evil, and, in fact, it is a reiteration of the answer the protagonists receive from "a famous dervish who passed for the best philosopher in Turkey" who, to their question what must be done to alleviate "a horrible deal of evil on the earth," answers: "Be silent."[14]

The intertextual light that can be thrown on *Michael K*, however, may become much grimmer than that shed by the rather frivolous, although sarcastic, *Candide*. There is a reference to another "garden," strongly present in the narrative, cultivated with one's own hands (and forehead!), which saves its inhabitant from idleness, vice, and want. Not only is Michael named K after the protagonists of *The Castle* and *The Trial*, not only does he build a burrow on the farm to hide himself from the world there, but even the "wisdom" of his life and times which appears to Michael on the penultimate page of the novel is voiced in almost exactly the same words of the animal from Kafka's "The Burrow": "Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time for everything" (249). It is precisely such truth of a gardener ("*the truth about me. I am a gardener*" (247–48)) which Kafka's protagonist finds underground, but he is more explicit in elucidating its meaning: "Inside the burrow I always have endless time – for everything I do there is good and important and satisfies me somehow."[15] This is precisely Michael's situation in his garden and it is no wonder, therefore, that Michael finds himself underground too: "I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because he lives in silence" (248). And silence is precisely what Kafka's animal finds enthralling about his construction: "The most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness."[16] Yet the happiness is lost (has always already been lost) with the appearance of the whistling noise that disturbs the beauty

[14] Voltaire, *Candide*, Chapter 30: 8 July 2007 <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/voltaire/candide.html>.

[15] Franz Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Vintage, 1999), 342.

[16] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 327.

of the burrow and sends the animal running along the corridors in panic.

There is, in fact, nothing benign about Kafka's burrow. First of all, the author strips it of all the appealing features Michael's ecological garden may have, it is a dark and rather disgusting place full of putrefying flesh and similar titbits. Moreover, it is a place of utter exhaustion where among the plenty of stored victuals the animal goes through repeated bouts of panic – precisely the moment it decides to tuck itself into the safest place of the burrow, it dawns on it that it is just the place where it is exposed to the greatest danger, so it starts to rebuild the burrow and relocate the supplies over and over again, which makes the animal so unhappy that it wants to leave the burrow forever and live in the open (which of course never happens). Thus, the burrow is a place of *wasting away*: although it was constructed to provide refuge from the war raging outside in which the law of survival of the fittest rules, one can abide in the burrow only in a state of utter exhaustion ("And then too exhausted to be any longer capable of thought, my head hanging, my legs trembling with fatigue, half asleep, feeling my way rather than walking, I approach the entrance […] Only in this state, and in this state alone, can I achieve my descent"[17]). Yet "what I felt as fatigue up there is no longer that here," it is transformed instantly "into ardent zeal,"[18] because everything in the burrow is by definition good, even if it may ultimately be lethal to the inhabitant.

This is precisely the situation of Michael on the farm where the joyful state of almost being able to fly finds its counterpart in the totally wasted condition the soldiers find him in. And as this state is caused by continuous fasting, we can refer to another story by Kafka, one which, to a large extent, revolves around starvation. This, however, will not be "A Hunger Artist," a somehow too obvious choice in this context (but whose confession – "For he alone knew […] how easy it was to fast. It was the easiest thing in the world"[19] – we can bear in mind), but a story in which fasting is not an art performed in order to be admired by others (Michael wants to be left alone, to be "out of all the camps at the same time") but a way of investigating the nature of food itself.

In "Investigations of a Dog," the investigations in question are of a queer nature because they are to elucidate something nobody else

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[17] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 341.
[18] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 341.
[19] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 270.

perceives as problematic at all, as they consist of inquiring "into the question what the canine race nourish[es] itself upon."[20] This question seems to take us back to the matter of gardening as it concerns the earth:

> My personal observation tells me that the earth, when it is watered and scratched according to the rules of science, extrudes nourishment, and moreover in such quantity, in such abundance, in such ways, in such places, at such hours as the laws partially or completely established by science demand. I accept all this; my question, however, is the following: "Whence does the earth procure this food?"[21]

The road to achieving this kind of knowledge, however, is hard, long and winding because nobody seems to understand what the dog wants ("If you haven't enough to eat, we'll give you some of ours"[22]). Finally, after many different questionings and efforts, the dog decides to starve as long as needed for the riddle of food to solve itself, in a sense, of its own accord. This almost kills him, but when he is on the verge of dying, when he collapses and vomits blood, a wondrous dog appears and starts to make music without sound, which revives our investigator and sends him running. Moreover, this event takes us back to the very beginning of the investigations since a parallel experience lay at the origin of the dog's inquiries: without any warning, he becomes witness to the performance of soundless music by seven strange dogs which make him ecstatic; the ecstasy, however, is experienced by our dog as utterly obscene:

> They had good grounds for remaining silent, that is, assuming they remained silent from a sense of shame. For how were they conducting themselves? Because of all the music I had not noticed it before, but they had flung away all their shame, the wretched creatures were doing the very thing which is both most ridiculous and indecent in our eyes; they were walking on their hind legs. Fie on them! They were uncovering their nakedness, blatantly making a show of their nakedness: they were doing that as though it were a meritorious act, and when, obeying their better instincts for a moment, they happened to let their front paws fall, they were literally appalled as if at an error, as if Nature were an error, hastily raised their legs again, and their eyes seemed to be begging for forgiveness for having been forced to cease momentarily from their abomination.[23]

[20] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 286.
[21] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 288.
[22] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 288.
[23] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 284.

It is this event which pushes the dog onto the path of investigation, but what he is looking for has only seemingly to do with the earth ("when I asked: 'Whence does the earth procure this food?' was I troubled, as appearances might quite well indicate, about the earth; was I troubled about the labour of the earth? Not in the least; that, as I very soon recognised, was far from my mind; all that I cared for was the race of dogs, that and nothing else"[24]) – ultimately his search is for something in the food that is not of nutritional value (product of nature) but for something that Michael – also a kind of starving investigator – finds on the farm even without eating, and what the starved dog experiences in the song which is both overwhelming and painful.

In Kafka's story the essence of this "something" whose nature is as contradictory as that of silent music turns out to be quite elusive. But in the context of *Michael K* we do not have to go through all the dog's trouble to answer the question of origin – "Whence does the earth procure this food?" – for Michael is precisely the only one who knows the force which makes the food come out of the earth: it is his mother that makes plants grow and when he waits for his seeds to germinate he meditates upon how she is buried and not yet risen (144).

The "truth" about himself, which he enunciates in repeating the phrase "I am a gardener," has a precise sense. He comes to Visagies' farm, which, without taking too much trouble to investigate,[25] he takes to be the place where his mother was born, and there he buries her ashes in the ground:

> He […] set about clearing a patch a few metres square in the middle of the field. There, bending low so that they would not be carried away by the wind, he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful. (80–81)

This ceremony inaugurates a new kind of life: "This was the beginning of his life as a cultivator" (81). The meaning of this cultivation

[24] Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 289.

[25] Michael is not only "not clever with words," he is most careless when it comes to the proper name, which seems to be the most important for him. When he finally reaches Prince Albert and asks for the farm his mother told him about ("I am looking for a Mr Vosloo or a Mr Visser who is a farmer"), he accepts the first name starting with V that is given him as the one he is looking for ("There is no Vosloo or Visser who farms. Visagie – is that who you mean?" (69)). Is it because he himself does not have a "proper" proper name and is just K? Is it also why in Kenilworth Camp he is called Michaels, as if his surname *really* was the residual K?

and of the farm seems to be clear – even the very site of the burrow suggests the return to the mother's body: "Three hundred yards from the dam two low hills, like plump breasts, curved towards each other. Where they met, their sides formed a sloping crevice as deep as a man's waist three or four yards long" (137). Therefore, the ecstatic food Michael misses in the camps, as he finally refuses to eat at all, the manna by the taste of which he was spoiled ("Is that why you will not eat camp food – because you have been spoiled forever by the taste of manna?" (206)) is the invisible milk of the absent mother, which cannot be found anywhere in the "real" nourishment ("What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust" (139)). The quality of food that gives it savour but that positively does not exist incarnates Michael's attachment to his mother: "When food comes out of this earth, he told himself, I will recover my appetite, for it will have savour" (139). And when the time comes the food in fact does have savour as the ecstatic ceremony of eating the first pumpkin demonstrates:

> The fragrance of the burning flesh rose into the sky. Speaking the words he had been taught, directing them no longer upward but to the earth on which he knelt, he prayed[26]: "For what we are about to receive make us truly thankful." […] He lifted the first strip to his mouth. Beneath the crisply charred skin the flesh was soft and juicy. He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes. The best, he thought, the very best pumpkin I have tasted. For the first time since he had arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating. The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight. […] Such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else. (155–56)

Is this ghost element of food, however, "the bread of freedom," as the medical officer supposes ("Maybe he only eats the bread of freedom" (200))? Knowing that Michael almost starved to death when he was his own master we can doubt it.

The medical officer's story is one of becoming the "disciple" of Michael perceived as a figure of paradoxical resistance, not even passive resistance, which implies wilful effort, but so lacking in resistance that this lack becomes resistance in itself:

> As time passed […] I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and did not pretend to be,

[26] Not to the father "above," but to the mother "below."

> not even a hero of fasting. In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again, you jumped again. When we told you to jump a third time, however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap; and we could all see, even the most unwilling of us, that you had failed because you had exhausted your resources in obeying us. So we picked you up, finding that you weighed no more than a sack of feathers, and set you down before food, and said, "Eat, build up your strength so that you can exhaust it again obeying us." And you did not refuse. You tried sincerely, I believe, to do as you were told. You acquiesced in your will […] but your body baulked. That was how I saw it. Your body rejected the food we fed you and grew even thinner. *Why?* I asked myself: why will this man not eat when he is plainly starving? […] It was not a principle, an idea that lay behind your decline. You did not want to die, but you were dying. […] Slowly, as your persistent *No*, day after day, gathered weight, I began to feel that you were more than just another patient, another casualty of the war […] I would stand in the doorway […] and upon me the feeling would grow stronger and stronger that around one bed among all there was a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness […] I would shake my head like a man trying to shake off a dream, but the feeling would persist. "This is not my imagination," I would say to myself. "[…] Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me." (223–26)

Yet, for all his fascination with this obscurity, the medical officer has his moments of insight too, as when he explains Michael's obliviousness to the world around him as resulting from what he metaphorically presents as a state of not being born: "A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature. I cannot really think of him as a man though he is older than me by most reckonings" (185). In other words, Michael is described as one over whom desire has no dominion because he is "full," not lacking anything he would have to look for in other people, and this is precisely what at first awakens the medical officer's curiosity, which later grows into full-blown admiration. However, we can literalise the metaphor here and ask about the circumstances of the real birth of this admirably whole man.

Michael is born to a house-servant mother and because of his deformity he is constantly with her: "She took the child with her to work and continued to take it when it was no longer a baby.

Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children. Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" (4). The mother is poor, she lives in a small room adjacent to the flat of her employers (where air conditioning equipment was to be installed but never was), and there is no indication of any male presence in the life of Michael or his mother – until the moment he is sent to school, all his world is contained within the bounds of the dual relation with his mother who is always present. The lack of any paternal figure in Michael's life as well as his later development suggests a scenario which may dispel some of the messianic darkness gathering over his bed.

For Lacanian psychoanalysis the absence of the paternal figure, or, rather, the paternal function leads to what it calls the foreclosure of the "Name-of-the-Father."[27] The act the father should perform is to separate the child from the mother. Because the infant's demand is to become one with the mother, to be plunged into this body that provides food, warmth and everything necessary for enjoyment, and mothers often have a tendency to put the child in a privileged position and make it the centre of their lives, the paternal function has to intrude and "triangulate" the dual relation by introducing language by means of the Name-of-the-Father, which is also the No-of-the-Father.[28] The paternal function is, therefore, constituted by a prohibition (No!) of the mother's body, that is, it introduces the Law by means of symbolic castration.[29]

Before the Law is introduced the child remains in an imaginary relation with itself and the mother, as described by Lacan in his best known article "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,"[30] and refor-

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[27] It is called the paternal function not because it necessarily indicates the presence of the biological father of the child but a particular element of the symbolic order – the paternal function can be fulfilled by any person, not even necessarily male, who will take the father's place in relation to the mother in the symbolic order.

[28] In French *Nom-du-Père* and *Non-du-Père* are homophonous. The following discussion of psychosis is based mainly on: Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 79–111.

[29] The Name-of-the-Father is, of course, in most cases connected with the surname the child receives from its father, and it is telling that in Michael's case it is just a vestige, the truncated K.

[30] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in: *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 75–81.

mulated in his Seminar VIII.[31] The child's original experience of his body as lacking in motor coordination brings anxiety, which is partly overcome when the child sees its image in the mirror for the first time, which allows it to identify with the whole it sees. Such imaginary identification is the beginning of the creation of the ego which is by definition an idealised (and therefore alienated) image of the child – in reality the child is not whole; it is not even in full control of its functions. Because in the dual mother-child relation the bodily presence of the mother is taken to be the only thing which the child demands and vice versa (the child being the treasure just because it is *my* child, without any reservations), this relation also belongs to the imaginary order. Thus, the child organises his world and his understanding of it on the basis of his imaginary identifications in which the only touchstone of whether something is good or bad is whether it enhances or impairs the relation with the mother. The Name-of-the-Father, which introduces language in the form of prohibition, breaks down the imaginary relation by "socialising" the child by means of the Law – the child has to reorganise his imaginary world in accordance with the symbolic order, which is the order of language and social conventions. As the image in the mirror was the impulse which led to the creation of the self (ideal ego), the father's "No!" (the *ur*-word) is the impulse which leads to the creation of the superego, that is, to the internalisation of social laws and parental ideals.

In the case of Michael the parental No! is never uttered, as not only is his father absent but there is also nobody to take his place. When the Name-of-the-Father is not introduced (when the symbolic castration does not occur), the imaginary order does not become restructured according to the demands of the symbolic and therefore remains the dominant order, while the symbolic becomes assimilated in the mode appropriate for the dominant imaginary, that is, by means of imitation of other people.[32] This is precisely Michael's case: having problems at school (the space of the symbolic), he is transferred to an institution which teaches him basic skills that are learned by means of imitation: "Because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick, Michael was taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of Huis Norenius in Faure, where at the expense of the state he spent the rest of his childhood in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate

[31] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 88.
[32] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 89.

children learning the elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bedmaking, dishwashing, basketweaving, woodwork and digging" (4). Michael even comments on this kind of upbringing himself when for the only time in the novel the name of the father is mentioned:

> My mother was the one whose ashes I brought back […] and my father was Huis Norenius. My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was "There will be silence in the dormitories at all times," and the woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we put on our khaki shirts and our khaki shorts and our black socks and our black shoes and marched two abreast to the church on Papegaai Street to be forgiven." (143)

Although for Michael the father is the set of rules (the Law), his relation to it is utterly imaginary – the rules remain completely "external," they are perceived as senseless and unjust (they have never been internalised as one's own) and are only obeyed because of the fear of punishment. As Michael's life is summarized at the moment when his imaginary organisation starts to break down: "He did not know what was going to happen. The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait" (92). No wonder that the first "commandment" speaks about silence since it was precisely silence that Michael had experienced *instead of* the paternal No!

According to Lacan, the foreclosure of the paternal function leads to the creation of the psychotic clinical structure in a human being, which means that a person can be diagnosed as psychotic even when he still appears to be "normal," that is, before the symptoms characteristic of psychotic breakdown appear (delusions, hallucinations, etc.), because the most characteristic feature of psychotics is their problems with language. Since the introduction of the Name-of-the-Father creates the original metaphor in which the father's No! takes the place of the mother as the source of *jouissance*, when it does not take place the metaphorical use of language is unavailable.[33] As we have already noted, Michael is "not clever with words" and his lack of cleverness consists mainly in his inability to find words to describe his experience; when the metaphoric function is blocked, when one

[33] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 91.

is unable to use old words in new metaphors, one seems to experience states of feeling that can only be described as unutterable or be designated with a neologism which no one would understand anyway ("His heart was full, he wanted to utter his thanks, but finally the right words would not come" (66)). But more importantly the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father creates a situation in which the world of meaning lacks a firm foundation and therefore can easily collapse. The paternal metaphor, when it succeeds, brings to life the first meaning on which all the others will be built and even if this meaning ("the return to the union with the mother is bad") is contested in retrospect, it will be "too late" to eradicate it. When the paternal metaphor is created "a link is established between language and meaning (reality as socially constituted), between signifier and signified, that will never break."[34] If this anchor or, as Lacan calls it, "button tie" (*point de capiton*),[35] is not established, there is a danger that the imaginary fabric of the self (the ego) may be torn apart and destroyed.

The foreclosure of the parental metaphor can also be helpful in explaining Michael's fixation at the oral, that is, pre-genital stage of the organisation of the drives. As the overwriting of the imaginary by the symbolic leads to the inculcation of socially constituted ideals and laws, it also leads to "an ordering and hierarchisation of the drives under the dominance (or 'tyranny' to use Freud's term) of the genital zone."[36] Without this symbolic reordering Michael's sexuality is stalled at the oral stage where his principle enjoyment is the enjoyment of the mother's milk through the mouth while his genital sexuality is virtually non-existent: "How fortunate that I have no desire to father [...] I am one of the fortunate ones who escape being called" (143). Or, as the medical officer puts it: "With Michaels it always seemed to me that someone had scuffled together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth, and without a doubt the contents of the head) and omitting one or two details (the sex),

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[34] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 93.

[35] "A button tie, in the upholsterer's vocabulary, is a type of stitch used to secure a button to fabric and stuffing in a couch or chair, whereby the button and fabric are held together not in reference to a wooden or steel frame but simply in reference to one another. There is no true anchoring here, strictly speaking, since an anchor suggests an unmovable terra firma to which something is attached" (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 93). *Point de capiton* is more often translated into English as anchoring or quilting point.

[36] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 89.

but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth" (220).[37]

Because of the lack of the button tie, however, Michael's oral organisation is far from stable – such an imaginary hierarchy of drives can be undone when the supporting imaginary order breaks down, which happens when Michael is for the first time confronted with a paternal figure in the form of the master, that is, the Visagie boy, the grandson of the owners of the abandoned farm. The boy, the representative of the "world outside," and therefore of laws and symbolic obligations (even if he is a deserter), insolently disturbs the sanctuary of the union of Michael with his mother's body which makes the plants grow, and his very appearance (the appearance which triangulates the relations on the farm) brings about the beginning of Michael's collapse: "He felt the old hopeless stupidity invading him, which he tried to beat back" (83). And in order to save himself from further deterioration in obeying the master he flees up into the mountains where "the lances of light pierce his head" (95) and he becomes cured of hunger and other bodily needs because his body enters a state of *bliss* ("He wondered if he were living in what was known as bliss" (93)). In other words, while living in imaginary union with his mother, Michael unexpectedly becomes confronted with the Father/Master figure as the representative of the paternal function, which leads to the collapse of the imaginary organisation of drives with the effect that the body is invaded by what is at first called "stupidity" (displeasure in the breakdown of the hierarchy) but which turns out to be an invasion of bliss (when the collapse is total), that is, of *jouissance*, which is another characteristic psychotic symptom: when the hierarchy of the drives collapses the body becomes attacked by *jouissance* which takes the form of overwhelming ecstasy (or pain). We can elucidate the reason for the collapse schematically by using Lacan's schema L (see page 57).[38]

Because Michael's world is anchored in the imaginary relation between himself and his mother/farm (a→a' axis), when the father figure appears, and with him the symbolic order of the Other (A in Lacan's schema, from the French *Autre*), it turns out that the subject (S) of meaning which would be able to respond to the Other – the subject created by the paternal metaphor – is simply not there:

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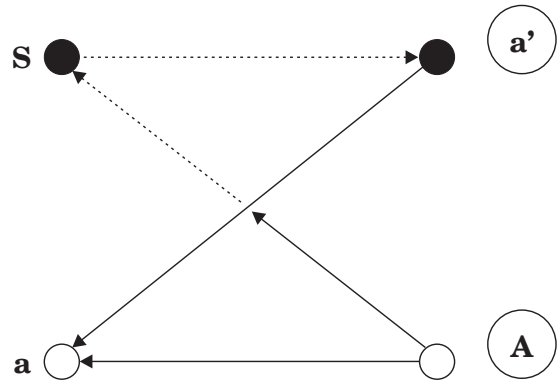
[37] The comment is condescending, even contemptuous, but the medical officer's "conversion" is already there in embryonic form: the "mythical" body takes the place of the "medical" one.

[38] Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in: *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 40.



a hole opens in its place and its appearance breaks down the tentative imaginary organisation.[39]

The ecstasy he experiences, however, is lethal, as Michael soon understands – after a period in the mountains during which with his mind empty he swims in bliss, "wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing" (94), "it came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing, that he might lie here till the moss on the roof grew dark before his eyes, that his story might end with his bones growing white in this faroff place" (95). The ecstasy is lethal because the human body is not made to the measure of jouissance, it can bear only a small amount of it (what remains of *jouissance* after the father pronounces his No! which is a prohibition of the *jouissance* of the mother[40]), its unrestricted invasion inaugurates "the path towards death,"[41] that is, a disintegration of the self which leads to the inability to act and therefore extinction. So Michael crawls down to Prince Albert where he is intercepted by the authorities, put into hospital and, almost unconscious, is fed until he can physically take

[39] Although Coetzee senses this hole inside of which Michael's self disintegrates, his intuition leads him astray when he tries to make sense of it: "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong" (150–51). But, in fact, Michael never asks himself who he is, he is always *sure*: I am a gardener, I am a gardener, I am…

[40] The paternal metaphor divides the subject (or more precisely creates the subject as divided) by introducing the split, the lack that enables desire to appear which becomes a defence against *jouissance*. The paternal metaphor makes possible the situation in which rather than be the mother's phallus (filling her lack with my body) I desire to have a phallus (come into possession of values that my parents appreciate: education, money, fame, etc.).

[41] Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar XVII), trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 18.

care of himself, upon which he is sent to Jakkalsdrif Camp to be re-educated by imitation of others and thus to regain his tentative "balance." Michael notices this attempt at education himself and is horrified: "This is like Huis Norenius, he thought: I am back in Huis Norenius a second time, only now I am too old to bear it" (101). What is more, he notices the ravages *jouissance* has wrought on his body: "The time in the mountains has turned me into an old man" (111).[42]

This is where he meets a paternal figure, Robert, who is not only a family man but also lectures Michael on the political meaning of their situation, the state of the country, the insurgents, etc.[43] Through his lecturing, he wants Michael to "wake up" to the *meaning* (metaphor) of the events around him: "I have never seen anyone as asleep as you" (115); "You're a baby […]. You've been asleep all your life. It's time to wake up […] your eyes aren't open, you don't see the truth around you" (121). After all this lecturing it is not surprising, especially in the case of a person who has only imaginary relations with others, that Michael starts thinking like Robert:

> When people died they left bodies behind. Even people who died of starvation left bodies behind. Dead bodies could be as offensive as living bodies, if it was true that a living body could be offensive. If these people really wanted to be rid of us […] they would have to give us picks and spades and command us to dig; then, when we had exhausted ourselves digging, and had dug a great hole in the middle of the camp, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down; and when we were lying there, all of us, they would have to break down the huts and tents and tear down the fence and throw the huts and the fence and the tents as well as every last thing we had owned upon us, and cover us with earth, and flatten the earth. *Then*, perhaps, they might begin to forget about us. (129–30)

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[42] The second period on the farm, after Michael escapes from Jakkalsdrif, wastes him even more – the relation of the medical officer starts: "There is a new patient in the ward, a little old man who collapsed during physical training" (177); and later: "Though he looks like an old man, he claims to be only 32" (178).

[43] For instance: "They don't want a camp so near their town. They never wanted it. They ran a big campaign against the camp at the beginning. We breed disease, they said. No hygiene, no morals. A nest of vice, men and women together. […] What they would really like – this is my opinion – is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean" (112).

But Michael's reaction to such thoughts is typical for a psychotic – he disowns them as not his: "It seemed more like Robert than like him, as he knew himself, to think like that. Would he have to say that the thought was Robert's and had merely found a home in him, or could he say that though the seed had come from Robert, the thought, having grown up inside him, was now his own?" (130). When the father's demands to "wake up" cannot be assimilated because there is no subject of meaning; that is, when the symbolic relation is not possible, the child takes up the female position towards the apodictic imaginary father, which is presented here by means of Michael's passive relation to the thought and the metaphor of insemination.

Although Robert is presented as a benign figure who takes care of Michael, gives him practical advice and tries to make him understand the meaning of the world in which he lives, the position Michael takes against him can be more clearly spotted in the relation between Michael and another father representative who wants to wake him up and who is at first sight the reverse image of Robert. After Michael escapes from Kenilworth Camp, he meets a pimp (also a "family man": "That one is my sister […]. The one in there […] is also my sister. Plenty of sisters I have. A big family" (236)), who on seeing Michael so thin ("When did you last eat, man?" (236)) extends a bottle of wine to him and says: "Come, let us give this man something to wake him up" (236). The result is predictable (Michael vomits up the wine), but the pimp feeds him, finds him a place to sleep and even tells one of the girls to make love to Michael (which is probably his first time). In spite of his largesse, the pimp is treated throughout as a fraud who wants to take Michael's treasure away from him – the seeds he has carried from the mother's farm. Like Robert, who, by attempting to force his meaning on Michael, tried to establish the paternal metaphor which would allow Michael to desire (to substitute something else for the mother's body), the pimp (to whose ministrations Michael remains as passive as he remained to Robert's lecturing), by forcing the pleasure principle on him, also tries to turn him into a "desiring machine": " 'It is difficult to be kind,' he said, 'to a person who wants nothing. You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it. That is my advice to you, my thin friend' " (244).[44]

In the final analysis both these men are presented as frauds because they want to separate Michael from his mother for good, be-

[44] Inoculated pleasure in the form of "having a good time" is perceived by Michael as fraudulent because it is unconnected to the lethal *jouissance* of the mother.

cause both Robert's meaning and the pimp's pleasure are there to make Michael ask himself, "What do I want?" "What should I do?" that is, to make him into a desiring being who does not know and therefore can always question his acts or motivations, while Michael (and this is another typical feature of a psychotic) *knows for sure*: "[…] he had been brought into the world to look after his mother" (9). The lack of the original metaphor results in the lack of movement of thoughts and interests (metorymic substitution) – what is just is, and there is no meaning to it: "He could lie all afternoon with his eyes open staring at the corrugations in the roof-iron and the tracings of rust: his mind would not wander, he would see nothing in the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy: he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time" (159). Where there is no desire, nothing is enigmatic and there is no foundation allowing for the possibility of permanent questioning of one's status (typical for "normal," that is neurotic, subjects) – what remains is only repetition of the same phrases which replaces their explanation[45]: I am a gardener, I am a gardener, I am a gardener, … which Michael ceaselessly recites to himself.

The encounter with the pimp and the ministrations of his "sister" result in shame and disgust brought about by the attempted separation from the mother, which cause a collapse into ecstasy again: "He drank from the tap […] voided himself, unable to help it, and drank again. So light now that he could not even be sure his feet were touching the ground" (245). So where else can he go from there and in such a state to regain his balance than back to the womb, the room where it all had started, "the room where his mother had lived" (245),[46] and whom else can he find there but a fantasy of the "good" father to wash away the memory of all the obscene father figures he has encountered, a version of the father so weak and derelict that it would even be possible to go back to the farm with him without the fear of "triangulation." But the finding of the figure of the father there may come as a surprise because up to this moment all Michael ever wanted was to be left *alone* with his mother. And, of course, on closer inspection, this father is no father at all but an im-

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[45] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 101.

[46] This Beckettian exhausted little old man returning to his mother's room/womb would, of course, constitute another of the intertextual relations not mentioned so far. Yet another relation could be found in some Beckett plays in which characters who refuse to open their mouths are tortured to make them talk (as, for example, in *Words and Music* and *What Where*).

aginary supportive mother figure composed of images of Michael and his mother – lying on the absent man's cardboard, wrapped in his smelly blanket, Michael imagines him as "a little old man" (the exact words in which the medical officer has described Michael) whom he will wheel from Cape Town to the farm in an abandoned barrow or cart as he did with his mother. What is more, the final scene of this fantasy (and the novel itself) takes us back to the very beginning of the book ("to make an end is to make a beginning," as T. S. Eliot would have it?) where Michael, because of his hare lip, "could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger" (3), so that his mother had to feed him with a teaspoon:

> And if the old man climbed out of the cart and stretched himself […] and looked at where the pump had been that the soldiers had blown up so that nothing should be left standing, and complained, saying "What are we going to do about the water?", he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (250)

In the fantasy the old story is repeated again: Michael takes here the position of his own mother and feeds himself (the little old man) with her invisible milk on which one can live until one dies of starvation.[47]

But apart from the absence of a man who is turned into the fantasy of return, Michael also finds something much more palpable in his mother's room: what he sees there are the abandoned objects one can usually come across in *gardens*: "As his eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness he made out scores of tubular steel chairs stacked from floor to ceiling, huge furled beach umbrellas, white vinyl tables with holes in their centres, and nearest the door three

[47] The retreat to the mother's womb and the fantasy which takes us back to the beginning of the novel as well as beyond it to a "better world" (also the mother's womb) may suggest that these are Michael's final thoughts before dying – of course, if we adopt the "rationalistic" perspective, which is not obligatory while discussing literary characters, that a man who has not eaten for months and whose intestines have degenerated irreparably finally has to die of exhaustion. If Michael does not die, however, this fact would suggest a very grim reading of the book, since the story of a victim who no matter what torture s/he goes through remains alive, and what is more becomes ever more beautiful (or, as Michael, appealing), clearly takes us into the space of a Sadean fantasy.

painted plaster statues: a deer with chocolate-brown eyes, a gnome in a buff jerkin, knee-breeches and green tasselled cap, and, larger than the other two, a creature with a peg nose whom he recognized as Pinocchio" (246). These objects are far from "natural," however; they have nothing to do with the sublime discourse of gardening that Michael and then the medical officer present us with. Therefore, if there is any meaning they shed on the final pages of the narrative (where the meaning is usually looked for) in their cheap artificiality and the dust they gather, it seems to be a rather satiric comment they pass on the whole interpretation of Michael as the Natural Man who almost starved himself to death living in a pocket outside of historical time and obeying his natural instincts. Can't we even say that Pinocchio, this handicraft come alive, is a tongue-in-cheek image of the character Michael K, also the product of craft performed with hands, and because of his "obscure meaning" larger than life?

However, what about the last of our father figures, the father turned believer, in the novel? At first the medical officer treats Michael condescendingly as an object of his benevolence, as somebody too stupid to take care of himself. Thinking that it is for Michael's own good, he tries to make him eat. But as the attempts to make him eat are carried on simultaneously to the attempts to make him speak, and more specifically to speak about his mother – in other words, to produce a rationale, a meaning (which would have to be rooted in the parental metaphor) for what he did on the farm – both undermine Michael's imaginary self. When he was pressed into telling his story ("Your own mother is buried on the farm, isn't she?" (190)), "[the medical officer] noted how distressed he becomes when he has to talk about his mother" (191). The distress, however, is not the product of a reluctance to impart to his would-be interlocutors the knowledge (meaning) he possesses. Such knowledge simply does not exist in Michael, as he cannot put into words (into a meaningful story) what he did on the farm – the only thing he can and does say about it, as we have already noted, is to repeat the phrase "I am a gardener" or similar expressions: what grows is for all of us, we are all the children of the earth (190).[48]

This psychotic persistence gradually awakens the interest of the medical officer because he cannot understand it, so he starts observing Michael more closely and asking himself "What does he want?

[48] What we read in the novel about Michael's ruminations while living on the farm is of course free indirect speech, the product of the narrator who, unlike Michael, discharged from school for being too slow-witted, is very "clever with words."

What is the meaning of his starvation?" On closer examination, he sees clearly that Michael is in the grip of something over which he has no control. Some force – which the medical officer cannot help but interpret as natural (its insistence does not come from Michael's mind, so it is taken to originate in his body) – rebels against confinement:

> I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live. Suicide, I had understood, is an act not of the body against itself but of the will against the body. Yet here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature. […] It was not a principle, an idea that lay behind your decline. You did not want to die, but you were dying. You were like a bunny-rabbit sewn up in the carcase of an ox, suffocating no doubt, but starving too, amid all those basketfuls of meat, for the true food. (224–25)

The medical officer's coming to the heady conclusion that, although he does not know what it is, there is something in nature (in the "natural" body) that cries out for freedom is the beginning of his transformation into a disciple: "Upon me the feeling would grow stronger and stronger that around one bed among all there was a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness, a black whirlwind, roaring in utter silence above your body, pointing to you, without so much as stirring the edge of the bedclothes" (225–26). Finding this meaning in Michael, he can persuade himself that his fascination is not some private quirk of a person who cannot find a meaning in his life and therefore grabs at anything that comes his way:

> I would shake my head like a man trying to shake off a dream, but the feeling would persist. "This is not my imagination," I would say to myself. "This sense of gathering meaningfulness is not something like a ray that I project to bathe this or that bed, or a robe in which I wrap this or that patient according to whim. Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me. If it were, if the origin of this meaning were no more than a lack in myself, a lack, say, of something to believe in, since we all know how difficult it is to satisfy a hunger for belief with the vision of times to come that the war, to say nothing of the camps, presents us with, if it were a mere craving for meaning that sent me to Michaels and his story, if Michaels himself were no more than what he seems to be […], a skin-and-bones man with a crumpled lip […], then I would have every justification for retiring to the toilets behind the jockeys' changing-rooms and locking myself into the last cubicle and putting a bullet through my head. (226)

And his conversion becomes complete when he decides to receive "the meaning [which] erupted into the world" (227) in the guise of Michael K and announces that rather than understand (metaphorise) Michael – which is impossible because there is no word for this meaning "in a system" – his intention is to follow him along the natural road (the road his *body* knows) to the "garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden […] which […] is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps" (228). This garden which does not belong to any camp, in other words, the space of freedom but at the same time of certainty, the metadiscourse which is in no way biased, not infected by any ideology (whether that of the army, of the insurgents, of charity, etc.), the discourse which is not blind to what it represses, is nowhere to be found in language (in the symbolic), and therefore the medical officer is right to look for it in the "living" body. But the "living" body that "knows," which appears to him to constitute the sublime discourse of freedom, can only be the enjoying body of the psychotic[49] – which is a radical example of *unfreedom*. At the mercy of "headless" drives left to their own devices such a body is subjected to the ultimate violence of jouissance, which leads to its destruction. What is the meaning of the fact that belief in such a body becomes a new faith of one liberal conscience?

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[49] According to Lacan, as the consequence of the establishment of the paternal metaphor the body becomes overwritten with signifiers (hierarchisation of the drives, etc.), which makes it a dead body, a body that has been socialised.

Foe (1986)

Foe is the first book by Coetzee in which his intertextual work, so far only implied (although quite clearly) comes into the open.

Susan Barton, after the mutiny of the crew of a ship sailing back to Portugal from Brazil, or more specifically Bahia, finds herself on the site of one of the few modern western myths, that is, Robinson Cruso's (Coetzee's spelling) desert island. Yet the place does not bear much resemblance to the original that we find in Defoe's book, with its high praise for the scrupulous protestant work ethic and unabashed propaganda for colonialism. Cruso seems to look the same as Defoe's protagonist – he wears animals' skins and a conical hat – but his personality appears to be very different. There is, however, a much more important difference here: his man Friday is not an indigenous Carib, as in *Robinson Crusoe*, but a black, and since we are off the South American coast, he must be a former slave. Moreover, although Susan relates that Cruso does not mark the passing of time in any permanent way, he claims to have been on the island with Friday for fifteen years, which, according to her, would have made Friday a child at the time Cruso's ship was wrecked. That would mean that most probably Friday was born a slave. Cruso claims that Friday was captured by "the slavers, who are Moors"[1] but he is an unreliable source – he tells Susan contradictory stories about himself and Friday, including ones we know from *Robinson Crusoe*. One of them, in agreement with Defoe's version of Friday being "a cannibal whom [Cruso] had saved from being roasted and devoured by fellow-

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (London: Penguin, 1987), 23; further references in the body of the text.

cannibals" (12), does not fit Coetzee's framework precisely because his Friday is black – he is not a local native of repulsive habits whom Cruso might have taken over and "re-educated" in western ways. Moreover, this version would put Cruso in an ambiguous position in respect of Friday's mutilation since – and this is a second crucial difference from *Robinson Crusoe* – Friday's tongue has been cut out. Cruso blames it on the slavers, but the matter remains undecidable as Cruso himself behaves like a slave owner using language only as the quickest way to subject Friday to his will ("This is not England, we have no need of a great stock of words" (21)) – in a sense, he deprives him of language, since we must understand language as first of all an appeal to the other in which a subject looks for recognition.

There are many hints throughout the book that it might have been Cruso who mutilated Friday. Moreover, what is suspicious is the way Friday's muteness fits perfectly into Cruso's imaginary order of things – it should, therefore, be asked what place Friday's mutilation occupies in the configuration of the island.

Cruso presents Friday's mutilation as a primordial sign whose precise meaning cannot be identified ("'Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy,' [Cruso] said. 'Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday's wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took as a punishment. How will we ever know the truth?' " (23)) but its general signification is clear: it is a sign of submission. What we have here is the effect of what Nietzsche recognised as a (maybe even *the*) "mnemotechnic" as old as human civilisation which takes as its material support the flesh and blood of the human body because "only that which *hurts* incessantly is remembered."[2] Such a violent incision aims to inscribe the body with the law of culture, that is, to overcome the merely instinctual biological mechanism. The bloody inscription in the real of the body doubles it up and erases the realm where "bodies are their own signs" (157; the final fantasy of *Foe*), what signifies here is a cut in the body, that is, a wound, a lack, a signifyingness that enables creation of all other signifiers.

This is a wound that founds memory which is, in turn, a necessary support of the law: " 'Nothing is forgotten,' said [Cruso]; and then: 'Nothing I have forgotten is worth the remembering' " (17). But

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 42.

of course if the law has to be established properly, it cannot recognise itself in the sheer master-violence of its founding gesture, and therefore what has to be forgotten is the origin of the wound, if not the wound itself. Even if Cruso (unconvincingly) claims that " 'Friday lost his tongue before he became mine' " (37), the very position of Friday in respect to Cruso (he is "mine") shows that their relation is based on such mutilation, whether it be real or symbolic (in our case both). With such a violent incision at the origin of their relation it is not surprising that "there is no call to punish Friday" (37).

Moreover, the law of the island, as Cruso presents it, although at first it calls to mind Defoe's Crusoe's protestant ethic, curiously does not seem to make much sense: "On the island there is no law except the law that we shall work for our bread, which is a commandment" (36). Yet the desert island in the Caribbean is precisely the place where one does not have to sweat to till the land to be able to feed oneself, because of the abundant vegetation, some of it edible, available for consumption all year round. "Working for one's bread" in Cruso's version turns out to be toiling for the pure idea of the "future" bread – Cruso applies most of his time and strength to building walled terraces on the calmer side of the island where he clears and levels the ground to prepare it for agriculture but, since he has no seeds to sow, farming remains for him an almost messianic ideal indefinitely postponed into the future: "The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed" (32).

Susan clearly does not find this logic convincing and calls what Cruso spends his time on "a stupid labour" (35), but when she bemoans his refusal to write down the diary of his life on the island, he counters her with: "I will leave behind my terraces and walls" (18). So does he not treat his labour as a kind of writing? As he had done with Friday, he tries to introduce a permanent cut in nature, a sign incised in the very substance of the real, this time introducing meaning into the inert substance of the island with the pain of his own body: what we have here is an empty gesture ("disinterested" because bearing no substantial fruit) of subjugation/mastery, an incision incomprehensible to Susan but nevertheless visible to the big Other of the eye in the sky. So, in a sense, Cruso externalises his memory in a writing of stone – not something that would be helpful in making him recollect the details of the past, but incisions in the very flesh of the island, the result of his attempt to inflict memory on it, to impose on it a new kind of "rock formation" and therefore incisions that add up to and surpass its geological constitution. And

Susan ultimately comes to understand the signification of the subduing effort when, back in England, she compares the process of writing to what Cruso and Friday under his command did: "But when you see me at Mr Foe's desk making marks with the quill, think of each mark as a stone, and think of the paper as the island, and imagine I must disperse the stones over the face of the island" (87). Therefore Cruso is, in a sense, right when he speaks about "working for bread" as the law of the island, but only if we take the phrase "working for bread" as the arbitrary signifier for the imposition of the law on the island – what Cruso tries to achieve with his "foolish kind of agriculture" (34) is the same that he believes himself to have achieved with Friday: to inscribe the real with the signifier, to make it remember beyond the cycle of birth and corruption, to split the island from itself, to give it a second body purified by the incision – not the telluric body of the uncanny mother who is cannibalistic/devouring (horrifying) and yet at the same time abundant (providing food freely), but a subjected, "castrated" mother, even if a sterile one (turning wild vegetation into empty fields).

Such a foundation of order on the island, the workings of which she does not fully grasp, is the response to Susan's amazement that nothing "extraordinary" takes place on the island: "It seemed to me that all things were possible on the island, all tyrannies and cruelties, though in small; and if, in despite of what was possible, we lived at peace one with another, surely this was proof that certain laws unknown to us held sway" (37). In other words, Susan asks herself a very literate question that takes us to another crucial site of the western literary tradition, one which is a kind of dark obverse of the robust innocence of *Robinson Crusoe*: why did Cruso not become like Kurtz of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*? Although there is a shade of Kurtz in him, especially in his feeling that the world is riddled with cannibals ("exterminate all the brutes"), Cruso's intention is to found a balanced system in which what is imagined as natural excess has to be cut out. The voice of the law is exemplified for him in Friday's "singing," which Cruso calls "the voice of man" – since Friday has lost his tongue, the voice of man is a humming the primary signification of which is a display of mutilation. Friday is Man: a cannibal turned man by means of excision/punishment ("Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took as punishment"). This is the price one has to pay for a balanced universe – in spite of appearances and the pedigree of the protestant ethic in *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee's Cruso attempts to turn (and, in a sense, succeeds in turning) his island into an Eden, an organic community in which

the pleasure principle rules, and not into a capitalist utopia permeated by desire.

In psychoanalytical accounts the pleasure principle, despite the way it is popularly imagined, does not aim for a maximum of pleasure but for a steady state of balance (pleasure), that is, it is a device to keep excitation (unpleasure) at the lowest possible level. When Susan arrives on the island, she frustrates the attempted state of homeostasis with her immoderate desire for the "beyond," that is, to be returned to civilisation ("I have a desire to be saved which I must call immoderate. […] It burns in me night and day, I can think of nothing else" (36)). Contrary to what one might expect of a castaway, Cruso himself clearly feels no such desire. In fact, he gets angry when he hears her speak of her desires and reminds her that there *are* laws on the island, even if they at first seem to be invisible (as Friday's mutilation is invisible): "Laws are made for one purpose only […] to hold us in check when our desires grow immoderate" (36). The law he speaks about more than any other is the law of excision of desire, which puts into clearer focus why Cruso is so adamant about the "unnecessary" uses of language and speech, since the only way to articulate desire is by means of speech.[3] More than that: desire does not pre-exist speech; in speech it is brought into existence.[4]

It becomes increasingly easy to believe that it was Cruso who mutilated Friday because his muteness is ideal for the balanced world Cruso projects – with orders passed only one way from Robinson to Friday, desire, which is a social product of language, does not have a chance to articulate itself. The mutilation of Friday is an obstacle that prevents desire from appearing on the interpersonal stage as it always does in the voice of the other in the form of the enigmatic excess of the question *Che vuoi?* – what does the other want from me? This is the question that any kind of speech produces: the other is saying something to me but why is he doing it? There is a message in his words but what is he trying to achieve with that message? The subject cannot, of course, answer this question and the lack he finds in himself as a result is the propelling force of desire, or rather this lack is constitutive of desire as such. When the subject looks in

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[3] Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique* (Seminar I), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 183.

[4] Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar II), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 228–29. This is one of the meanings of a famous Lacanian dictum that "man's desire is the desire of the Other": there is nothing natural about desire, it is a product of symbolic exchange.

himself for the cause of the other's desire (which by nature cannot be found because it is pure semblance), he seems to find it already on the other side – in the other, in ways the other seems to be able to enjoy. Since this is precisely what the subject lacks (*jouissance*), the other appears as the one who stole the *jouissance* and begs for violent action/retaliation.

Friday's mutilation accomplishes two things at once: it punishes his "cannibalistic" drives (but since Friday's cannibalistic *jouissance* is precisely Cruso's projection of his own inability to enjoy, Friday is punished for the theft of enjoyment) and it excises the very "mechanism" of language, which would produce Cruso's desire (the excess of *Che vuoi?* in every utterance). Of course, theoretically Friday still has the means to communicate to Cruso his desire (by means of gestures, etc.), but, as we have noted, the mutilation is precisely the mnemotechnic device to make him remember that this is unwanted – for the pleasure principle to rule, language, if it is used at all, should be reduced to a minimum (orders) and travel only one way. It is by this violent excision of what he perceives as Friday's obscene surplus that Cruso tries to conceal the lack from himself. In other words, by cutting out a piece of flesh, he tries to excise object *a*, a remainder of the uncastrated *jouissance* of the Other (surplus and lack at the same time, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed), that is, he tries to remedy his symbolic castration (the lack that produces desire), by a violent incision in the real.

This incision (Friday's mutilation) becomes the founding gesture of the new dispensation, its master signifier: from the outside of the order it appears as a violent act of subjugation, but from the inside it remains an "empty" signifier (the meaning of this mutilation, its purpose, is said to be enigmatic) whose origin recedes beyond the limits of conceivable memory (Friday described as having appeared on the island already mutilated).[5] With no desire of the other to confront him, Cruso's desire becomes radically curtailed – since Friday is now silent, he is considered to be only the tool in the care of his master. "He has known no other master. He follows me in all things" (37), says Cruso, but this is obviously only the imaginary dimension of Cruso's mastery since, as we know, Friday does things that remain beyond Cruso's comprehension, such as the scattering of petals on the water that Susan witnesses.

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[5] Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: The Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 147.

By "moderating" his desire (in a very immoderate way) Cruso creates an Eden, an "organic" community in which "everybody has his place for the good of all" and where antagonism (whose root for Cruso is desire) is supposedly overcome (by absolute subjugation). He offers the following theodicy for this best of all worlds: " 'If Providence were to watch over all of us […] who would be left to pick the cotton and cut the sugar-cane? […] You think I mock Providence. But perhaps it is the doing of Providence that Friday finds himself on an island under a lenient master, rather than in Brazil, under the planter's lash, or in Africa, where the forests teem with cannibals. Perhaps it is for the best, though we do not see it so" (23–24). But of course the truth of such a position is that antagonism is only dissimulated by an authoritarian rule (Friday does not follow Robinson in everything) that perceives itself as benevolent. What is more, the creation of a model society brings Cruso nothing but depression – in spite of achieving what he perceives as balance, he is a deeply melancholic figure prone to dissolving himself while he observes the great emptiness of the horizon. We have to be careful not to take this as a kind of mysticism – unlike a true mystic, in his "practice of losing himself in the contemplation of the wastes of water and sky" (38), he is completely devoid of joy. If anything, this contemplation makes Cruso even more morose.

So maybe, after all, Susan is right when she says, "I used to think, when I saw Cruso in this evening posture, that, like me, he was searching the horizon for a sail" (38); if we take it together with Cruso's confirmation of the fact that he is also looking out to see if cannibals are coming (12) – for him the whole world overflows with cannibals, every man being a cannibal in need of mutilation (Friday's voice is the voice of Man) – we can suppose that Cruso, in fact, unconsciously is looking for something to come out of the wilderness of water and sky to save him from the suffocating atmosphere of his stagnant Eden which makes him drown in emptiness, that he longs to break out of the stagnant pool of his paradise run by the pleasure principle,[6] but at the same time does not want to break out, knowing full well that being "saved" would mean leaving the island and returning to the painful world of cannibals (of immoderate desire). Ultimately, what are his terraces if not signals addressed to the figure of the big Other (God) to come to his rescue, to break the steady diet of nothing, an impotent gesture visible only to the empty eye in the sky?

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[6] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 88–89.

Therefore the deliverance can come but only from the outside – Cruso is too attached to the perfect utopia he has founded (stable submission of the death drive to the rule of the pleasure principle: is it not the matrix each "enlightened" utopia has tried to put forth as a model?) – and it comes in the shape of the woman and her "immoderate" desire which breaks the spell of homeostasis. Susan is from the beginning conscious of death (stasis as the *opposite* of the death drive) ruling the island and it is only she who notices that Friday does not follow Cruso in everything, that there is a side of him in which he is his own man. Re-finding in him the *Che vuoi?* of her own desire (How did he lose his tongue? What is his desire?), she can now assume what Cruso tried to excise from himself and with such disturbing of the balance the spell is broken; fresh air can enter the stifling atmosphere of the island and with it a ship can appear that will take them back to England. All of it, however, must turn out to be lethal to Cruso whose externalisation the island, in a sense, becomes – when he is taken off the island, he has to die since in the world he would have to become his own antagonist: a desiring cannibal, and thus no longer Cruso, an Adam chased out of paradise.

Susan visits paradise, but she is not happy there ("I had no temperament to love such emptiness" (38)) – more than that, she conceives of her stay there as a punishment: "We are all punished, every day. This island is our punishment, this island and one another's company, to the death" (37). From such words it would seem that the period on the island constitutes a traumatic experience, but it appears to have to her a strangely entertaining side to it: as if she came from the future, she keeps plaguing Cruso with injunctions to put his "adventures" down in writing; she even outlines the method he should apply, which is precisely a new "realistic" method "invented" by Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe* was his *first* "adventure" book):

> The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no importance, such as: When you made your needle (the needle you store in your belt), by what means did you pierce the eye? When you sewed your hat, what did you use for thread? Touches like these will one day persuade your countrymen that it is all true, every word, there was indeed once an island in the middle of the ocean where the wind blew and the gulls cried from cliffs and a man named Cruso paced about in his apeskin clothes, scanning the horizon for sail. (18)

Moreover, she keeps repeating that "the world demands stories from its adventurers" (34) and that "the idea of Cruso on his island is a better thing than the true Cruso tight-lipped and sullen in an alien England" (35). The very idea of the island is from the start conceived by Susan in terms of narration/fabulation, and "What will we tell folk in England when they ask us to divert them?" (43). To divert may be to entertain but it can just as well be to turn aside from the intended course.

The "taking over" of Friday by Susan means assuming confrontation with something traumatic, with a wound that is both horrifying ("But now I began to look on him – I could not help myself – with the horror we reserve for the mutilated" (24)) or, to be more precise, disgusting ("I covertly observed him as he ate […] with distaste" (24)), yet at the same time utterly fascinating since Susan hardly thinks of anything other than Friday and his mutilation till the end of the book. It is this "unhealthy" fascination which constitutes the obverse side of the attitude of "the white man's burden" whose terms are evoked by Susan as a rationale for taking Friday on board ship: "Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things" (39). In other words, Friday presents himself to Susan as a task – while Cruso's answer to the traumatic encounter with Friday's desire was to abandon speech to avoid the confrontation with the wound (the repression which, however, returned in the real as the message of the terraces), Susan reacts with the attempts to somehow heal it in the symbolic order with knowledge: in order to do it one has to somehow elicit Friday's story from him, "to build a bridge of words over which […] he may cross to the time before Cruso" (60). In other words, to heal the wound would mean to narrativise Friday, to create a discursive memory for him within the western symbolic order. However, since Friday's wound is a wound not only in his symbolic "texture" but in the real of his flesh, the narrative would succeed only if it found a discursive way to dissimulate the obscenity of the wound by a story that would explain it away as either something he deserved (e.g. "he was punished this way for what he did as a cannibal") or something that can be disowned (e.g. "the slavers, who are Moors, did it").

In fact, what we encounter in the typical colonial gesture of disavowal is not really an either/or alternative but a triple overdetermination comparable to what can be seen in a famous illustration of the logic of dreams given by Freud – when one is accused of damaging a kettle by a neighbour one answers: I never borrowed the kettle from you, I returned the kettle to you undamaged, the kettle

was already broken when I borrowed it, anyway. In Friday's case a similar logic operates in Susan's holding three mutually exclusive positions typical of the colonial discourse at the same time: we did not want them, they were thrust upon us by circumstances ("I do not love him but he is mine" (111)); we did not mutilate them, they were already mutilated (morally and mentally deficient according to our standards) when we encountered them; although we did not do it, they deserved to be punished, for example, for their laziness and unimaginable, therefore horrifying, thoughts ("I […] am turning Friday into a laundryman; for otherwise idleness will destroy him […] But surely it is better to learn useful tasks than to lie alone in a cellar all day, thinking I know not what thoughts?" (56)).

Susan's attempts to get beyond the wound are also threefold and all of them of course misfire. Her symbolic attempt to get rid of the wound is to manumit Friday (she puts a written statement that he is a freed slave around his neck) and send him to Africa but she very quickly realises that the big Other does not accept her voluntarist intervention – when she tries to find a ship that would transport him there, she sees that her symbolic act does not mean anything because the moment she loses sight of Friday, he will be treated as a slave again and sold to a new owner.

Another attempt is to communicate with Friday on the level of the signifier which is not yet neutralised by the symbolic order (where its meaning is differential and arbitrary) but which is shot through with enjoyment. At first it has a form of "sincerity" in the voice: "I knew of course that Friday did not understand the words. But it had been my belief from early on that Friday understood tones, that he could hear kindness in a human voice when kindness was sincerely meant" (41). Such understanding of tone, although it tries to go beyond meaning, is of course still heavily dependent on the message of the words (e.g. words expressive of kindness), so the next logical step is to pursue tones that scrap the message altogether.

When they stay at Foe's house, Susan finds a case of recorders and, remembering the melody Friday used to play on the island, tries to communicate with him by means of music. She thinks that by repeating, and therefore, in a sense, "exchanging" his melody with him, he will be gradually led to vary the pattern in different directions and by such means they will find themselves in a common space of, if not signification proper, then at least something that underlies signification, that is, the signifying intention. Yet her exertions meet with failure since, as she is bound finally to notice, Friday's playing is not meant for anybody but himself; his melody is just a support

which his drive gets hold of in order to circulate around its empty centre. The melody is played not in order to achieve something (e.g. to address the other) but just for the sake of playing it, which brings enjoyment in itself, in other words the drive does not have a goal, or rather its goal is just its dumb circulation.[7] What is more, a drive is always partial, so it sticks to its chosen support (in Friday's case it is a six-note melody) not allowing it to be dialecticised – the signifier a drive gets attached to cannot be incorporated into the network of other signifiers which would allow enjoyment to disperse throughout the network and make the exchange (not repetition) of signifiers enjoyable. In other words, the drive never addresses the other; it is totally solipsistic and since it is always partial, that is, multiple, only a given note or a set of notes can be libidinally invested, not "music" or "sound" as such.

Susan's go at music has, however, a totally different logic – for her, music and its goal are already split. Music is a means to achieve something else, that is, communication – what is eroticised here is not the very stuff of music (sounds) but their exchange ("Are not both music and conversation like love?" (97)). In other words, Susan's logic is the logic of desire which always addresses the other and is the answer to the other – she mistakes Friday's melody for an enigmatic message (desire for recognition) addressed to her desire (or to the big Other/the symbolic order in general) and by repeating the message she responds to this desire with a desire of her own.[8] In the logic of desire, this response should neutralise the object (desire is ultimately not desire for a given object but for desire of the other) and enable variation, that is, the exchange of other objects (other configurations of notes), which are only the arbitrary signifiers of desire, which is the proper "object" of exchange. This "object" is the lack itself – since desire is "desire for the Other's desire," it is essentially empty, it is the very sliding from one object to the other, the exchange of one object for another, so, strictly speaking, desire has no object but has a cause (lack).

The exchange with Friday does not happen, however, so Susan's desire for recognition is frustrated and she flies into a rage. Playing music "with" Friday turns out to be so traumatic for Susan ("I had to hold back an urge to strike him and tear the wig and robes away

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[7] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Seminar XI), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), 168.

[8] "The object of man's desire […] is essentially an object desired by someone else" (Jacques Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 34 (1953), 12).

and thus rudely teach him he was not alone on this earth" (98)) precisely because what she thought would be a discourse to heal the wound (music) turns out to display the wound in all its obscenity – the flow of desire is blocked; there is nobody to exchange music with because there is no longer the subject. What Susan encounters is the horror of the void of jouissance, which the infinite repetition of the six notes creates and into which Friday disappears.

After the failure of a belief in the motivated nature of signs, an attempt to render "the real" of kindness by means of voice and the failure to implicate Friday in the dialectics of desire by means of tones as such (music), there is yet another step Susan takes towards grasping Friday. Along with playing his melody Friday also dances, or rather he plays and dances at the same time, yet when a flute is unavailable he performs only the dance accompanied by a humming sound. He puts Foe's wig and robe on and "[if] the sun is shining he does his dance in a patch of sunlight, holding out his arms and spinning in a circle, his eyes shut, hour after hour, never growing fatigued or dizzy. […] In the grip of the dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach. I call his name and am ignored, I put out a hand and I am brushed aside. All the while he dances he makes a humming noise in his throat, deeper than his usual voice; sometimes he seems to be singing" (92).

Susan's reaction to his dancing is not an ordinary mixture of disgust and fascination but what can be described as utter panic which finds expression in a veritable hole in her narrative, a break that is the truth of a rupture that she tries to displace into the past as a supposed hole of the origin (the story of Friday before he lost his tongue) which is presented by her as the silence that prevents the narrative of the island to constitute itself as a totality. Towards the end of the book Susan reveals to Foe that in Friday's dance "when he spun, the robes would stand out stiffly about him, so much so that one might have supposed the purpose of his dancing was to show forth the nakedness underneath" (118) but when she tries to convey what she saw (she is suspicious that Friday's mutilation is double, that his docility is caused by castration), it turns out that she appears to have seen nothing: "What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them. I saw and believed I had seen, though afterwards I remembered Thomas, who also saw, but could not be brought to believe till he had put his hand in the wound" (119–20).

What she saw is rendered here by the purely tautological gesture of the narrative (I saw what I believe I had seen) used to dissimulate

what cannot be included in the discourse (cannot be symbolised) – the vortex of *jouissance*, the Thing itself, the pulsating, disgusting substance of life which no signifier can represent – and the wound she refers to in evoking the biblical episode of Thomas is not to be taken as referring to Friday's mutilated genitals but to the wound of a lapse of ego (a lapse of vision) that the discourse tries unsuccessfully to suture with its empty gesture. When Susan is confronted with the core of her fantasy that draws her to Friday (the dark secret of his *jouissance*), she experiences a momentary lapse of ego, of her consistent self, which is also a lapse of memory. Susan cannot see whether he has or does not have the "instrument" of his *jouissance*, because his whole body in the trance turns for her into the figure of *jouissance* and she experiences in his naked presence the pulsation of the Thing that is whole, that does not divide into parts (head, chest, genitals, etc.), and therefore lacks nothing.

The further point is, however, that what she sees/does not see (Friday's *jouissance*) is not something that is "objectively" there – what happens is just Susan's confrontation with her fundamental colonial fantasy of the "ethnic" (even in spite of his mutilation) possessing the treasure of how to enjoy that has been lost to the West, so the undecidability between presence and absence (penis and its lack) dissimulated by a tautological gesture of discourse is precisely the undecidability of Susan's experience: seeing Friday naked and spinning she encounters her lack in the empty support that enables the colonial fantasy – Friday's body is just a support for a fantasy projection, and when this projection gets too close to its real (What does his instrument of enjoyment looks like? Is it there at all?), it encounters its own nullity there in the form of subject consistency coming momentarily apart. To be able to overcome this undoing of the imaginary texture in the confrontation with the colonial real another experience of nothingness is needed.

When Susan tried to speak to Friday in "sincere tones of kindness" she had spoken from the position of a master/mistress; when she tried to involve him in a musical exchange she did it from the position of an equal (although the equality was only formal, the way subjects are formally but not really equal in liberal democracies); when they travel to Bristol to put Friday on a ship to Africa they become "really" equal in the eye of the Other, in other words, they are both treated as underdogs ("Aye, […] but we call them gipsies when they roam about with their dirty faces, men and women all higgledy-piggledy together, looking for mischief" (108)). In this state of deprivation, soaked with rain and cold to the bone, not knowing

what to do to warm herself, Susan starts to whirl around in Friday's dance and finds that it helps – she seems to get warmer. Her first reaction is to put the event into an orderly providential narration of knowledge: "I have discovered why Friday dances in England […]. And I should never have made this discovery had I not been soaked to the skin and then set down in the dark in an empty barn. From which we may infer that there is after all a design in our lives, and if we wait long enough we are bound to see that design unfolding" (103).[9] But this "knowledge" is only a point after which the complete obliteration of the subject takes place:

> Thinking these thoughts, spinning around, my eyes closed, a smile on my lips, I fell, I believe into a kind of trance; for when next I knew, I was standing still, breathing heavily, with somewhere at my mind's edge an intimation that I had been far away, that I had seen wondrous sights. Where am I? I asked myself, and crouched down and stroked the floor; and when it came back to me that I was in Berkshire, a great pang wrenched my heart; for what I had seen in my trance, whatever it had been – I could summon back nothing distinct, yet felt a glow of after-memory, if you can understand that – had been a message (but from whom?) to tell me there were other lives open to me than this one in which I trudged with Friday across the English countryside, a life of which I was already heartily sick. (103–4)

When Susan steps into Friday's shoes, when she becomes an underdog, that is, when she "identifies with her symptom," what is revealed to her is not the wondrous sight of the other world (this is precisely what she *does* remember from her spinning: the passing vision of the "higher purpose") but "the night of the world" (Hegel), a nothingness, a void, the pure negativity that the subject is; in her spinning she is "removed" (104), she falls out of her symbolic and imaginary orders and comes back with a presentiment that "other lives" *are* possible, that is, that the world they find themselves in as "gipsies" in hostile Berkshire is thoroughly contingent and lacking in purpose. This, however, is accompanied not by grief (the tragic "we are just helpless tools in the hands of blind forces/fate") but by joy: if one can "remove" oneself, one can overcome one's determinations and

[9] The unvoiced companion illumination here (what on the face of it looks like misfortune from a higher perspective is the realisation of some good) is of course that the same narration embraces Friday: if we wait long enough the design will surface that will show us that the mutilating of Friday also aimed at some good or knowledge as yet unclear from our clouded perspective.

find an "other life" for oneself. We should also note that it is probably the only moment when Susan speaks about herself and Friday as "ourselves": "As long as we two are cast in each other's company, I thought, perhaps it is best that we dance and spin and transport ourselves" (104).

One should, however, be aware that such "ourselves" must be distinguished from any "communal" meaning – what Friday and Susan have in common is nothing of substance – it is precisely this "nothing" that Susan just felt, the experience of the nullity of the big Other and one's imaginary identifications. In other words, what Susan experiences (without clearly realising it) is the inability to build "a bridge of words into the past" to "explain" Friday, because in such explanation either Friday's story will be narrated in the colonising discourse which triply obfuscates what happened (the story of the borrowed kettle; in such discourse a perspective will always be found from which Friday's mutilation will have some "deeper meaning" in the workings of Providence) or he will be rendered in "multiculturalist" discourse as "altogether" other, completely reducible in his "ethnic" substance to his different symbolic order which the West cannot properly comprehend (in consequence donning a blank mask on which the West can project what it feels it lacks and what it disavows, therefore evoking both fascination and disgust).

Against such narrativisations, which are ultimately two sides of the same coin, Friday's "sameness" should be emphasised, the sameness that has two forms. Firstly, there is no "originally ethnic" Friday – even if we can imagine him as the originally ethnic Thing (a clear impossibility, since the subject is always at least minimally free of his ethnic determinations), the trauma of mutilation (the western intervention in his "substance") bars him forever from being "pure," it retroactively "disfigures" his former experience and mediates his "substance" with western discourse (even, or maybe especially, if its incarnation is the sheer violence of inflicting pain). The point is therefore not that Friday cannot tell us about his wound – he clearly can, if he wishes – but that speaking about it to us he will always only ventriloquise our own discourse (our own values) which we will always be able to turn to our advantage.

In this context, another "substantialist" answer is also false – a substantial sameness found in pity: "Poor Friday is also a human being as ourselves, he also can suffer as we do." Such an attitude towards the other is a clear example of a dissimulated colonial illusion of grandeur by which we congratulate ourselves on our different (read: higher) moral values: one can find cultures (also in the

European past) in which suffering is not the worst thing imaginable. In contrast, what makes Friday the same as Susan Barton is his ability to be removed, transported, to be "born again," to suspend the functioning of the determining symbolic "machine" and start from scratch, to become his own author. In other words, his ability to exercise freedom.

Susan's gaze is, however, set on a completely different kind of authorship – with the help of noted author Daniel Foe (the birth name of Defoe) she attempts to be narrated into the stuff of colonial adventure discourse, which is another of her efforts to close the trauma of the island, this time on the imaginary level.

Her behaviour in this respect, however, is quite peculiar. As we have noted, on the island she has already behaved strangely – one of the main thoughts that preoccupy her is how to turn what is happening to her into a story to "please the reader" and she desperately looks for situations that may interest him in her uneventful existence. She even gives instructions to Cruso on how he should write a book about himself. Her narrative fixation is of course also one of the reasons she sticks so persistently to the enigma of Friday's tongue since this is definitely a detail which promises blood, violence, cannibals and, in a word, adventure. After returning to England, she therefore does the expected – she looks up a well-known author, noted for writing books based on other people's confessions and presents herself to him as his good fortune ("I am the good fortune we are always hoping for" (48)). Supposedly dissatisfied with her own creative effort to write down her story for Foe's perusal (she "loses her substance" – she feels that in her story she is just a shadowy, unconvincing presence behind the body of Cruso), she begs Foe to remedy it with his art: "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of truth" (51). Yet this is but the first step on a road that leads much further, because soon enough the shadowy presence Susan feels in her own story (supposedly caused by her lack of skill) spills out into her reality in the world itself – she pleads to be given back her life: "Will you not bear in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?" (63). The substance lost this time is not just "colour" of the properly formed character of the story; what Susan asks Foe for is ultimately an interpretation of the island adventure that will be able to provide meaning for it (and therefore for her) continuous with the texture of the symbolic order they both inhabit: "The waves picked me up and cast me ashore on an island, and a year later the same waves

brought a ship to rescue me, and of the true story of that year, the story as it should be seen in God's great scheme of things, I remain as ignorant as a newborn babe. That is why I cannot rest, that is why I follow you to your hiding-place like a bad penny. Would I be here if I did not believe you to be my intended, the one alone intended to tell my true story?" (126)

What we encounter here in the guise of an appeal for truth is a typical plea that a hysteric addresses to the big Other – in this case the obvious representative of the symbolic order in the guise of the story-teller – for domination: unless you dominate me, that is, unless you provide the meaning of my story by including it in the texture of narratives constituting the hegemonic symbolic order I no longer exist, I am nothing without you. But of course the hegemonic symbolic we are speaking about is that of (divine and earthly) patriarchy, colonial domination, and "heroic" capitalism, so the attempt to include Susan's story into it, to return her substance to her by means of story-telling, would paradoxically result in the book we already have in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which is unabashed propaganda for colonialism and protestant male individualism, and from which all traces of the feminine on the island are entirely erased (Susan has a premonition of that: " 'Better had there been only Cruso and Friday,' you will murmur to yourself: 'Better without the woman' " (71–72)). There is, however, another possible alternative within the realm of early eighteenth-century prose, something we know very well from Defoe too, that is, the book consisting of the confession of the fallen woman.

Susan's haphazard references to her life before she is washed ashore on the island tell us of her leaving England for Bahia because of some intelligence she has that her eloped or kidnapped daughter is there. She spends some time in Bahia supporting herself as a "free woman" (prostitute) looking for her daughter, does not succeed in finding anything and boards a ship sailing for Portugal. This information is what Foe predictably latches onto in order to "return substance" to Susan: in order to provide meaning to the island adventure one has to insert it into the story of a life in which it can be shown as a step on the way in a larger scheme of the divine plan leading on to either salvation or damnation. Since providing meaning for her story is what Susan begs him for, he demands more stories of her life off the island. Here, however, comes the properly hysterical turn to Susan's plea: she wants to be dominated by Foe (by his attempt to create her meaning) but only in order to test him, to make him prove his mettle, that is, she wants her meaning but only on

her own terms – she refuses to provide him with more information and challenges him to find her meaning within the island episode alone. When Foe protests that "the island is not a story in itself […]. We can bring it to life only by setting it within a larger story" (117), Susan refuses his suggestion that the meaning of the episode of the island (and of her life too) should be created by inserting it into the larger narrative of Susan's quest for her daughter and proposes that the proper way to excavate the meaning of what happened on the island is not by pursuing the known meaning of the absent daughter (who she "really" is is not an enigma), but the unknown meaning of the present Friday: "If the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue" (117). What, however, if Foe's writerly intuition about meaning is right after all, what if there is yet another shadow hiding in the shadow of Friday's lost tongue?

Susan challenges Foe to make the story speak for itself, which would amount, according to her, to putting Friday in its centre and finding some words for him. In order to do this one should start with the only sign Friday provides of his enigmatic symbolic universe in the whole story, which Susan accidentally observes on the island: "He crossed the shelf of rock that stretched out from the cliff-face, launched his log upon the water – which was deep at that place – and straddled it. […] After paddling out some hundred yards from the shelf into the thickest of the seaweed, he reached into a bag that hung about his neck and brought out handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water" (31). The flakes turn out to be "white petals and buds from the brambles that were at the time flowering on parts of the island" (31). Susan conjectures that the place of this strange ceremony might be the one where the ship with Friday and Cruso sank, but Foe's intuition goes in a different, supposedly fantastic, direction: "Those great beds of seaweed are the home of a beast called by mariners the *kraken* […] which has arms as thick as a man's thigh and many yards long, and a beak like an eagle's" (140). When Susan remains unconvinced, he pursues his metaphor for a familial trauma that against our will draws us toward the dead of memory: "You say he was guiding his boat to the place where the ship went down, which we may surmise to have been a slave-ship, not a merchantman, as Cruso claimed. Well, then: picture the hundreds of his fellow slaves – or their skeletons – still chained in the wreck, the gay little fish (that you spoke of) flitting through their eye-sockets and their hollow cases that had held their hearts. […] Does it not strike you, in these two accounts [metaphoric

relation between the kraken and the slave-ship], how Friday is beckoned from the deep – beckoned or menaced as the case may be?" (140–41). The bed of seaweed is like the eye, the dark pupil of the story, Foe claims, but the menace is not for Friday: "He rows across it and is safe. To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye" (141). "Or like a mouth," counters Susan, displacing Foe's metaphor significantly: "It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence perhaps, or a roar of a shell held to the ear" (141–42). Yet the point is, of course, that in Friday's silence the master's discourse will hear only the kind of roar it feels prepared to hear since his silence can be shaped to speak for whomever wants him to speak according to the other's desire, which Susan has no choice but admit: "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desire of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman […] what he is to the world is what I make of him" (121–22). But that, of course, includes making Friday an empty centre of the story, since the story is the story of Friday's subjection, which turns out to be the story of the subjection of the unspeakable in the colonial discourse and this unspeakable is not nothing (although it might be enigmatic at first) but something which is withheld. So, when Susan admonishes Foe to distinguish Friday's silence (powerless silence) from her own (the power to withhold), we must, in contrast to her, perceive the identity of these silences in her act of positing the innocent powerless silence as the ultimate power that refuses to be subjugated by the discourse of power, while in fact it is the discourse of power (hers) which uses helpless silence to dissimulate its strength (its power to withhold meaning).

What, then, if we reverse the situation? What if we treat Friday's enigma as covering up for another suppressed meaning referring to Susan? What if it is Friday who seems to be a metaphor for some darker meaning in Susan's story, in spite, or maybe because, of her unrelentingly sticking to the empty significance of his silence, as she finally (and contortedly) admits: "But who will dive into the wreck [the traumatic place *par excellence*]? On the island I told Cruso it should be Friday, with a rope around his middle for safety. But if Friday cannot tell us what he sees, is Friday in my story any more than a figuring (or prefiguring) of another diver?" (142). Foe makes no reply to this, but who will dive into the dark pupil of the story if not the reader himself? So we can ask ourselves what might be found there. In other words, if Susan so violently wants to keep the

island episode apart from the meaning enfolding in the metonymy of her life and persists in thinking that the episode has significance of its own, what traumatic part of this metonymic chain does the island episode metaphorically displace?

One can readily notice that corresponding to the lack in the story (the excision of Friday's tongue) – which Susan presents as a hole in the narrative around which its meaning, and therefore *her* meaning too, revolves – there is a surplus that she refuses to have anything to do with: when she stays with Friday in Foe's deserted house a child appears who claims to be her daughter, also called Susan Barton. She disavows her completely, saying that little Susan does not resemble her at all and that she cannot be the daughter she was looking for in Brazil. Moreover, she blames Foe for the appearance of the child and accuses her of being a figment of his imagination, a trick that authorship inexplicably plays on her. But a reader of Defoe will notice that what we are encountering here is an "intrusion" from another story by this author told in his novel *Roxana*, where the main protagonist's true name is Susan and who also makes her living as a "free woman." Moreover, this Susan is of French Huguenot extraction (like Susan Barton) and among her many children there is a daughter also called Susan. The fate of this girl, however, is not to elope to Brazil where she conveniently disappears into thin air – in *Roxana* her departure is staged in a radically different way: she is murdered by the protagonist's servant Amy when the quest for her mother endangers "Roxana's" profitable and respectable marriage (the child does not know who her mother is but after gathering clues she concludes correctly that it must be "Roxana"). Little Susan, who in *Foe* is accompanied by her mother's servant Amy, recounts to Susan Barton the early life of her mother (as described in *Roxana*: married to a brewer who gambles, goes bankrupt and enlists as a grenadier in the Netherlands, leaving his wife and daughter destitute) but Barton denies ever having had such a daughter. What is more, in a dream scene she takes her deep into the woods to abandon her there, but before she departs she puts forward a theory about her parentage: "You are father-born," she tells her (meaning Foe's imagination), "You have no mother. The pain you feel is the pain of lack, not the pain of loss. What you hope to regain in my person you have in truth never had" (91). Yet it is the same Susan Barton who, as she progressively grows accustomed to her island story, finds authoring more and more easy: "From downstairs to upstairs, from house to island, from the girl to Friday: it seems necessary only to establish the poles, the here and

there, the now and then – after that the words of themselves do the journeying. I had not guessed it was so easy to be an author" (93). And it is the same Susan Barton who provides storytelling with its obverse side: "It is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be *father* to my story" (123; emphasis added). Well then, who is the father of which story? And is not proper fathering, as Freud taught us, a work of excision, of introducing the founding prohibition? And is not the aim of the story to dissimulate this prohibition without, however, being able to obfuscate it completely? In other words, is not its course that of transforming what should not be told into something that it is impossible to pronounce, in order to *save* oneself?

Foe's "theory of writing" as applied to Susan's story is as follows: "Have you considered […] that in your own wanderings you may, without knowing it, have left behind some such token for yourself; or, if you choose to believe you are not mistress of your life, that a token has been left behind on your behalf, which is a sign of blindness I have spoken of; and that, for lack of better plan, your search for a way out of the maze – if you are indeed a-mazed or be-mazed – might start from that point and return to it as many times as are needed till you discover yourself to be saved" (136). In order to save oneself the speechlessness or blindness has to be somehow put into words: "In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story" (141). And it is of course Friday who, as we have already mentioned, "rows his log of wood" across this "dead socket" or "dark pupil" (141) and saves the day. But the lack that he represents, and which is presented by Susan as the vanishing point of the story that she pursues with the help of Foe, after disappearing over the horizon reappears uncannily behind her back in the excessive figure of the daughter who pursues her mother beyond her own death.

Does this not explain the repeated image that is imposed on Friday, the victim of unimaginable mutilation? Every time identification with Friday goes "too far" (as in the moment of Susan's "ecstatic" experience of the dance), every time we are about to plunge into the dark pupil of the story, Friday loses his aura of mute deprivation and becomes the obscene *jousseur*, a cannibal, a devourer of dead flesh. The more there is talk about Friday's deprivation, the more urgently does little Susan plague her supposed mother with demands for recognition; the closer we get to the stories of dead children ("what if they took the [dead] child to be mine and laid hands on me and haled me

before the magistrates?"), the more does Friday become the image of the abject gobbler ("Had I not been there to restrain him, would he in his hunger have eaten the [dead] babe?" (106)).[10] This logic of obscene incorporation is not so misguided after all: in what is set up for us as the story of the island, the black hole of Friday's image incorporates into itself the dispersed residues of guilt and death.

What is then to be expected of Friday's story proper, the story he will write after he has been instructed in writing by Susan and Foe? It is said that only his own story can close the gap of meaning of the island and that this can happen only if he can talk or write. But what if he has nothing to say to us? What if within his horizon of meaning what we want to know from him, that is, the story of how he lost his tongue, is what shatters all meaning, something that makes his whole horizon of meaning crumble? Making him write may be viewed as the true completion of the trajectory of Susan's project – only by providing him with the western co-ordinates of discourse might one achieve the full neutralisation/obfuscation of the colonial and hegemonic discourse's violation put forth as a genuine point of view and expression of black "ethnicity." Friday's "confession," in order to be accepted as the work of somebody who learned how to write and not just as confused scribbling, would have to pass the test of being deemed "comprehensible" by his western teachers (first of all, Susan and Foe) and it will be so only on condition that it develops within their horizon of meaning, their ways of making sense, which will necessarily involve employment of the figures of higher purpose (providence, etc.) or, more neutrally, the western type of deterministic cause and effect logic (all, in a way, present even in the rules of grammar), which might be completely alien to Friday. By using such a sense-making apparatus Friday will more or less consciously always inscribe himself (and therefore his mutilation) within the discourse in which meaning for his trauma has always already been provided and therefore excused – the sheer violence of imposition of such meaning will be relegated to figures symbolising the accidental perversions of the necessarily sound sense-making natural principle (like the bad Moor who cut out Friday's tongue vs. the good lenient master Cruso), and even these figures will find their meaning/necessity in a divine and/or rational order of things (like the ennobling role of suffering). More than that, Friday's "true" story will dissimulate not only the violence of the colonial expansionist discourse toward the cultural other but

[10] Susan and Friday find a dead baby on their way to put Friday on a ship to Africa.

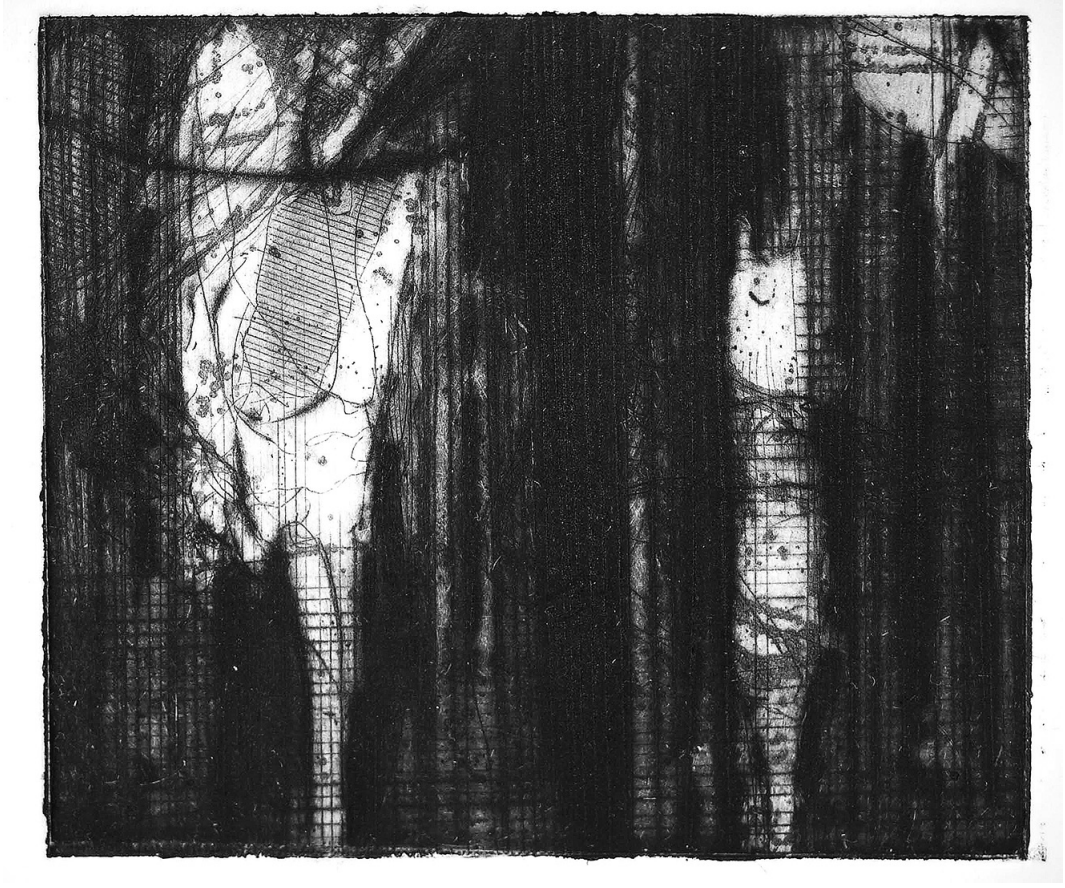
also the violence it perpetrates at home: by diverting the eye (the dark pupil of each story) from home to heroic or atrocious adventures in the faraway (is)lands it dissimulates the everyday atrocities at home (the same craving for money and/or recognition that propels colonialism, and thus the mutilation of Friday, is the driving force behind the murder of daughters at home when they threaten the pursuit of money and/or prestige).

The beginnings of Friday's writing can be seen as already burgeoning with such discursive traces. When instructed in the new art by Susan, he at first scribbles some uncertain or obscure signs that she interprets to be imperfect letters and then he draws open eyes "each set upon a human foot" (147). Within the context of *Robinson Crusoe* and its obsession with providence (the eye), where the imprint of a human foot stands for the invisible menacing presence (of cannibals), can we not see here the sign of the discourse that is to come? And with the next writerly feat of Friday, "rows and rows of the letter *o* tightly packed together" (152), how can we fail to note that (again, in the book by Defoe) Friday's words for prayer are "say o"?

Would it not make sense then to go even further and interpret the enigmatic ending of the novel along the same lines? In these two consecutive scenes all the figures apart from Friday are dead: somebody ("I") enters Foe's apartment passing dead little Susan on the landing and finding the authors, Susan and Foe, dead in bed. It is only Friday who is asleep but alive and when the "I" opens Friday's mouth he hears the sounds of the island issuing from it. On the one hand, what we have here is of course the poetic scene of the birth of indigenous writing, a scene from which the former "authors" of Friday are absent (or present only as corpses, the dead husks of meaning), while the narrator is a pure disembodied shifter, "I," who encounters Friday's obscure bodily materiality as the positive truth of the island. Yet this truth, if perused closely, uncannily resembles the authorial truth of the supposedly dead (is the "I" their undead presence?) who claimed that Friday's mouth is where the truth is to be found. And what we see/hear in the scene is precisely such truth coming out of Friday's mouth *as the truth of the island*. But the island is as alien to Friday as it is to Cruso: if they were really marooned there, both of them were washed ashore as strangers to the land – Cruso a European, Friday an African. There is no truth of the island that Friday can carry in his body because he is not a native, and if there were, it would be only within the discourse which claims that "primitives" are closer to nature in any circumstances. We know where this discourse comes from.

In the second attempt at an ending, the same disembodied "I" enters the same authorial room and slipping into the written narrative lying there ("At last I could row no further…" – the beginning of *Foe*) plunges into the dark pupil of the kraken and the wreck: "This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157). Therefore what we find in the dark kernel of the island narrative as the hard truth of Friday is the enchanted kingdom of the Adamic language buried in the primeval slime and overshadowed by civilised corpses floating above (Susan Barton, her captain-lover and all). Can we find a more obvious incarnation of the fundamental fantasy of the discourse of the European master? The fantasy of the parousia of the Other of the Other, of metadiscourse that will stop the infinite slippage of the signifier and bring us all back to the state of innocence. And this "truth" of Friday finally becomes clinched with the last image of the novel, which invaginates the limit of the story back into its middle. The last highly poetic passage – "His [Friday's] mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (157) – has an obscenely grinning mirror image: "Mr Foe, […] when I lived in your house I would sometimes lie awake upstairs listening to the pulse of blood in my ears and to the silence from Friday below, a silence that rose up the stairway like smoke, like a welling of black smoke. Before long I could not breathe, I would feel I was stifling in my bed. My lungs, my heart, my head were full of black smoke. I had to spring up and open the curtains and put my head outside and breathe fresh air and see for myself that there were stars still in the sky" (118).

The cool and somehow cleansing dark stream of the immediate primeval substance of truth looks very much like a gentrified version of the stifling black smoke of the actual presence of the other in the house. So perhaps we can finally propose that the two final attempts at the closing of the narrative are precisely samples of Friday's writing after he thoroughly internalised the discourse of the master who mutilated him, the writing in which the master floats dead (he no longer exercises naked force) but who in spite, or maybe because, of that secretly poisons the expression of truth by the ethnic and, in doing it, mutilates him even more.



Age of Iron (1990)

This book starts on a suspiciously high note with the sinister word: cancer. It is not at first spoken openly but euphemistically referred to as "the news." Mrs Curren, a seventy-year-old retired classicist, is said by her doctor to be past recovery. So the perspective from which the world will be viewed is from the start set out as liminal, a perspective which is traditionally conceived as the space of truth – when one has stepped out of one's habits and irrelevant attachments to everyday matters, one can at last see things as they really are "from the perspective of infinity." ("At every moment when I am thinking of something else, I am not thinking death, am not thinking the truth," says Curren.[1]) This perspective seems to be reinforced by a fateful accident: on the day "the news" is received a coloured homeless derelict – also somebody beyond the pale of everyday middle class decencies – puts his cardboard shelter at the end of the alley down the side of Curren's garage. "The first of the carrion-birds," she calls him with bitter irony (4), an irony known to her from the works of the classics; and then, unexpectedly, we are transported into a very different realm – the realm of melodrama:

> How I longed for you to be here, to hold me, to comfort me! I begin to understand the true meaning of the embrace. We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported. […] How I longed to be able to go upstairs to you, to sit on your bed, run my fingers through your hair, whisper in your ear as I did on

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Penguin, 1991), 23; further references in the body of the text.

> school mornings, "Time to get up!" And then, when you turned over, your body blood-warm, your breath milky, to take you in my arms in what we called "giving Mommy a big hug," the secret meaning of which, the meaning never spoken, was that Mommy should not be sad, for she would not die but live on in you. (5)

Without any warning we plunge headlong into this sentimental *petit bourgeois* arch-discourse of family values and motherly love, which is very much at odds with the detachment implied in the position of death. Can these two perspectives coexist? Do they annihilate or mediate each other?

The melodramatic tone of the narrative is no accident: the book is a descendant of a long line of sentimental confessions leading back to Rousseau – in this case it is presented in the form of a letter by a liberal mother to her daughter who has left South Africa for good and vowed never to come back unless "things change." And things are changing quickly in the South Africa of 1986, a time of mounting violence, the last years of the omnipotence of the police and special forces[2] – "From long ago," says Thabane, one of the black characters of the book, about a landscape of gutted and scorched shops, "from last year" (92). But why write a confession – which is always an *apologia*, a vindication of one's life – to a daughter who has left it all behind, who has established a new place for herself and lives safely with her American husband and children in the U.S.? "To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (5). Curren is writing an apology to herself, then. But does this make for melodrama?

Curren is dying, and dying of cancer, which is a disease that does not attack from the outside – out of the blue some of one's own cells, which have functioned properly so far, which knew their proper roles in the larger "mechanism" of the body, go wild and start to multiply without control ruining the equilibrium and making the mechanism break down. Parallels between Curren's cancerous body and the body of her country abound in the book[3] and, if one looks at it from a cer-

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[2] In 1990, Nelson Mandela is released from prison; in 1991 apartheid laws are repealed.

[3] To quote just two of many examples: "To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. [...] Death by fire the only decent death left. To walk into the fire, to blaze like tow, to feel these secret sharers cringe and cry out too, at the last instant, in their harsh unused little voices; to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the

tain angle, there is a point in this metaphor: Curren, who is 70 years old, comes from the generation which introduced apartheid, starting in 1948, and although she inveighs against the authorities as "them" ("The disgrace of the life one lives under them: to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on." (9)), this has been the South Africa of all her grown-up life. Now the system is collapsing, violently destroying its own tissue, experiencing something akin to what is happening to Curren's body.

However, this Hobbesian body politic does not admit Curren's melodramatic familial sedation ("Mommy should not be sad, for she would not die but live on in you"), but returns the truth of it to her in its true, that is, inverted form when, carried away by her rhetorical fervour, she announces: "The bullies in the last row of school-desks, raw-boned, lumpish boys, grown up now and promoted to rule the land. They with their fathers and mothers, their aunts and uncles, their brothers and sisters: a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (25). Under the veneer of good-natured sentimentality there is something obscene and ominous in harping on family values; what is more, there may be something in it which is inherently linked with the violence connected to political subjugation. This is, therefore, the origin of the apology: a careful disentanglement of the liberal soul from the apartheid body politic – a radical dualism is presented here: Vercueil, the alcoholic derelict, and his dog are imagined as "fulfilling their charge, waiting for the soul [Curren's] to emerge. The soul, neophyte, wet, blind, *ignorant*" (170; italics added).

The discourse of melodrama is, however, not the only one that comes easily to Curren. Being a classicist, she often cannot help but slide into classical parallels,[4] the strongest of which concerns her life under the apartheid laws:

> A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916 [the year of Curren's birth], certainly. So long

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world clean. Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow" (59); "I am not indifferent to this… this war. How can I be? No bars are thick enough to keep it out. […] It lives inside me and I live inside it" (95).

[4] To quote just two examples: "[Vercueil's] dog has not warmed to me. Too much cat-smell. Cat-woman: Circe. And he, after roaming the sees in trawlers, making landfall here" (77); "Blood on the floor, blood on the benches. […] A country prodigal of blood. […] Oxen kneeling over, their throats slit, hurling last jets into the air like whales. The dry earth soaking up the blood of its creatures" (57–58).

> ago that I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it.
>
> Like every crime it had its price. That price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner. I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name. (149)

What we have here is not just the introduction of an aestheticising classical parallel but an attempt at a full-blown application of the tragic as represented by ancient Greek tragedy, Aeschylus in particular. A crime was committed and the tragic guilt is visited on the following generations which have to pay the price. But there is an altogether too familiar perverse twist in the logic of tragedy, because although the heroes commit terrible crimes, which are very often shameful as well (incest, matricide, etc.), yet – and it is a rule in tragedy – their status (and therefore their shame too) remains heroic, precisely because what they do is to assume their shame unquestioning: Oedipus does not consider himself innocent but puts out his eyes for what he did without knowing it. Therefore the tragic "effect" is paradoxical to the extent that although shameful crimes are committed, the heroes in a sense escape the shame usually attached to such deeds and come out unsullied (though they are punished by the gods), radiating their tragic grandeur.

Curren seems to be attempting this kind of gesture in "heroically" assuming guilt in order to come out spotless:

> It had something to do with honour, with the notion I clung to through thick and thin, from my education, from my reading, that in his soul the honourable man can suffer no harm. I strove always for honour, using shame as my guide. As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonour. That was the use of shame: as a touchstone, something that would always be there, something you could come back to like a blind person, to touch, to tell you where you were. For the rest I kept a decent distance from my shame. I did not wallow in it. Shame did never become a shameful pleasure (150).[5]

Yet it suddenly becomes clear to her that her trick has not worked as she expected because it is precisely of shame that she is dying:

[5] This looks forward to Coetzee's next book, *The Master of Petersburg*, whose main protagonist, Dostoevsky, is precisely a gourmet of shame, and which is, in a sense, a treatise on the subject.

"I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself" (132). But this realisation comes quite late in the book (on page 150 in an edition numbering 181 pages) and from that moment the melodramatic family values discourse completely ceases to be invoked. What happens to it is something unexpected – it turns into a discourse far removed from the sentimental platitudes we have read so far:

> But since this writing has time and again taken me from where I have no idea to where I begin to have an idea, let me say, in all tentativeness, that perhaps *it dispirits me that your* [Curren's daughter's] *children will never drown*. All those lakes, all that water: a land of lakes and rivers: yet if by some mischance they ever tip out of their canoe, they will bob safely in the water, supported by their bright orange wings [lifejackets], till a motor-boat comes to pick them up and bear them off and all is well again. […] What can these two poor underprivileged boys paddling about in they recreation area hope for? They will die at seventy-five or eighty-five *as stupid as when they were born*. (178–79; italics added)

What happened to the sweet loving mother and grandmother sentimentalising family values and childhood's time of wonder, that she should blurt out on the final pages of the book such scathing remarks about the stupidity of a safe American life led in peace among one's happy relatives? And does this have anything to do with shame?

To answer this, we have to go back to the above-mentioned moment of clarity, to follow further its comments on the tragic in which goodness and heroism are opposed: "I have been a good person […] What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly-good. What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism" (150–51). It is a devastating pronouncement for Curren because up to then all her comments on the political situation in South Africa, and especially the anti-apartheid struggle, had gone in precisely the opposite direction.

Curren presents herself as a South African liberal who vehemently despises the apartheid authorities and we do not have cause to disbelieve her. However, there is the question of her attitude towards the "other side." No doubt she supports the cause of bringing down apartheid ("Your days are numbered," she whispers to herself with satisfaction when she sees its representatives on television (9)), but

when it comes to the *struggle* against the system she always resorts to her sentimental discourse in which family and especially proper childhood are the measure of everything.

There is an exchange between Curren and her black servant, Florence, in which two conflicting attitudes are brought into focus. After Bheki, Florence's fifteen-year-old son, and his friend John have an argument and a fight with Vercueil, and chase him temporarily from Curren's place, she inveighs against what she considers to be pathological violence which overthrows respect for elders and along with that destroys family ties:

> The more you give in, Florence, the more outrageously the children will behave. You told me you admire your son's generation because they are afraid of nothing. Be careful: they may start being careless of their own lives and end by being careless of everyone else's. What you admire in them is not necessarily what is best.
>
> I keep thinking of what you said the other day: that there are no more mothers and fathers. I can't believe you mean it. […] What child in his heart truly wants to be told that? Surely he will turn away in confusion, thinking to himself, "I have no mother now, I have no father: then let my mother be death, let my father be death." You wash your hands of them and they turn into the children of death. (45)

To which a swift answer comes from Florence: "That is not true. I do not turn my back on my children. […] These are good children, they are like iron. We are proud of them" (46). This puts Curren's family values into perspective: in a black family they seem to mean something quite different.

So what should the children do, according to Curren, instead of boycotting schools and running from the police?[6] They should not behave like adults and despise childhood because it is "the time of wonder, the growing-time of the soul" (6). However, in these times "not hospitable to the soul" children scorn childhood and so "their souls, their organs of wonder" become "stunted, petrified" (6). This is the way John, the teenager who treats Curren with suspicion as the enemy throughout the book, is presented by her – as not fully human: "This boy is not like Bheki. He has no charm. There is something stupid about him, something deliberately stupid, obstructive,

[6] Bheki says: "[The police] are not after me. They are after everybody. I have done nothing. But anybody they see they think should be in school, they try to get them. We do nothing, we just say we are not going to school. Now they are waging this terror against us" (61).

intractable. He is one of those boys whose voices deepen too early, who by the age of twelve have left childhood behind and turned brutal, knowing. A simplified person, simplified in every way: swifter, nimbler, more tireless than real people, without doubts or scruples, without humour, ruthless, innocent" (71–72).

If John is a simplified (and therefore deficient) version of a real person, the question should be asked: Who are the real people? The real people are obviously those whose souls are not stunted ("I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul," writes Curren (119)) because they did not spurn their childhood: "When I think back to my own childhood I remember only long sun-struck afternoons, the smell of dust under avenues of eucalyptus, the quiet rustle of water in roadside furrows, the lulling of doves" (85), "when, passing down the street on a hot Sunday afternoon, you might hear, faint but dogged from a front parlour, the maiden of the household groping among the [piano] keys for that yearned-for, elusive resonance. Days of charm and sorrow and mystery too! Days of innocence!" (21) Days of enjoying Bach and Brahms, "the real music, the music that does not die, confident, serene" (21), of "searching with my fingers for the one chord I would recognize, when I came upon it, as my chord, as what in the old days we used to call the lost chord, the heart's chord" (21). This is the sentimental image to which Curren's idea of humanity, of a rounded, "real" existence is inextricably connected, and for that reason the display of "real" sensibility has to sound like this: "Let me be granted just one more summer-afternoon walk down the Avenue amid the nut-brown bodies of children on their way home from school, laughing, giggling, smelling of clean young sweat, the girls every year more beautiful, *plus belles*. And if that is not to be, let there still be, to the last, gratitude, unbounded, heartfelt gratitude, for having been granted a spell in this world of wonders" (51).

For Curren, humanity as such is encapsulated in sensual imagery and because of that she projects it indiscriminately on anybody to whom for some reason she warms up: "Bar by bar the Goldberg Variations erected themselves in the air. I crossed to the window. It was nearly dark. Against the garage wall the man [Vercueil] was squatting, smoking, the point of the cigarette glowing. […] Together we listened. At this moment, I thought, I know how he feels as surely as if he and I were making love" (26–27). This way, Vercueil, the alcoholic man of leisure (we will return to this), is freely admitted to the class of real people, while John, the troublemaker with his pig iron sensibility (this is the age of iron), blinded by his hatred of

the whites, is allowed only an ideological rant (Curren: "Stay away till things have gone back to normal," John: "Things will never be normal," Curren: "Please! I know the argument, I haven't the time or interest to go through it again" (123)). The reason is plain: "My heart does not accept him as mine: it is as simple as that" (124).

But what does Curren know about the time of wonder, the childhood that John has given up so thoughtlessly? The imaginary picture of it is this: "Poor John, who in the old days would have been destined to be a garden boy and eat bread and jam for lunch at the back door and drink out of a tin, battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa!" (138) The aggression in her irony is unmistakable: he should have known his place – his life as a garden boy might have been happy (he and his children and his children's children, etc. destined to be servants forever), but he threw it away and now he is dead (John is killed by the police in Curren's house). Bach and Brahms for the real people, bread and jam for the stunted.

Yet the real confrontation with the image of what the black South African children have thrown away, their world of wonders, comes on the Flats, a black township called Guguletu, where Curren goes with Florence to look for Bheki:

> We were at the rear of a crowd hundreds strong looking down upon a scene of devastation: shanties burnt and smouldering, shanties still burning, pouring forth black smoke. Jumbles of furniture, bedding, household objects stood in the pouring rain. Gangs of men were at work trying to rescue the contents of the burning shacks, going from one to another, putting out the fires; or so I thought till with a shock it came to me that these were not rescuers but incendiaries, that the battle I saw them waging was not with the flames but with rain. (87–88)

And when the crowd takes flight as the incendiaries advance on it, all the refinement of the real person is gone – bumped into by "an enormously fat teenager" Curren's behaviour becomes inexplicably "stunted": "Damn you!" (89) she gasps in falling and, when she is able to get up, she wants to go *home* (to this fountain of family values). To which Thabane, one of the blacks who had brought her there, retorts: "But what of the people who live here? When they want to go home, this is where they must go. What do you think of that?" The same can just as well be said about Curren's favourite image of childhood, "the time of wonder, the growing-time of the soul":

when these children want to enjoy their childhood, this is where they must go to grow their souls.[7]

Curren's response to Thabane's words clearly brings into focus what we are looking for here. At first she speaks of leisure, detachment, the touchstone of real people: "There are many things I am sure I could say […] But then they must truly come from me. When one speaks under duress […] one rarely speaks the truth." And then about the truth of an individual, personal expression of the heart's chord searched for on a lazy Sunday afternoon: "These are terrible sights. They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people's words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth" (91).

These are rather strange statements from a person who is dying and simultaneously writing her confession, which is generally conceived as a statement of the truth of one's life. As we have already noted, what is supposed to produce the truth of her confession is not detachment in the sentimental sense of a Sunday afternoon under the eucalyptus trees when things can be measured with a neutral, or even better, a passionate eye, but a *trauma*, the fact that she knows she is dying – the truth therefore is supposed to be provided precisely when one is speaking under sentence of death.

And although the setting of smoke and fire is more appropriate for a Christian image of hell (which is obviously how it figures in the novel too), we can observe that the whole scene looks as if it were taken out of an Aeschylean tragedy: "It was from the people gathered on the rim of this amphitheatre in the dunes that the *sighing*

[7] In case the scene in Guguletu is considered too extreme to serve as a model image of black life in South Africa, here is a more everyday image to grow one's soul on: "He, William, Florence's husband, had a job and the job could not be interrupted. His job was to pounce on a chicken, swing it upside down, grip the struggling body between his knees, twist a wire band around its legs, and pass it on to a second younger man, who would hang it, squawking and flapping, on a hook on a clattering overhead conveyor that took it deeper into the shed where a third man in oilskins splashed with blood gripped its head, drew its neck taut, and cut it through with a knife so small it seemed part of his hand, tossing the head in the same movement into a bin full of other dead heads. […] For six days of the week this was what he did. […] A work he had been doing for fifteen years. So that it was not inconceivable that some of the bodies I had stuffed with breadcrumbs and egg-yolk and sage and rubbed with oil and garlic had been held, at the last, between the legs of this man, the father of Florence's children. Who got up at five in the morning, while I was still asleep, to hose out the pans under the cages, fill the feed-troughs, sweep the sheds, and then, after breakfast, begin the slaughtering, the plucking and cleaning, the freezing of thousands of carcasses, the packing of thousands of heads and feet, miles of intestines, mountains of feathers" (38–39).

came. Like mourners at a funeral they stood in the downpour, men, women and children, sodden, hardly bothering to protect themselves, watching the destruction" (88; italics added). The crowd of Guguletu assumes the role of the ancient Greek chorus here: what takes place in a tragedy deeply concerns the chorus because it represents the local community as such, the people in their unheroic, everyday aspect – it is for this reason that the chorus usually consists of old men or women who are moved by fear because they are unable to act against what threatens to destroy them.[8]

The crowd which at first sighs painfully upon seeing the destruction of their living space and then flees when threatened by the thugs stops in its flight to gather around the two actors engaged in the *agon* (Curren and Thabane), and when their exchange is ended the chorus – or rather a voice from the crowd, the coryphaeus – pronounces, in the traditional choric role, the verdict of the community: "This woman talks shit" (91). Curren refuses to leave it at that and, carried away by her melodramatic rhetoric, finally does speak the truth, *her* truth, the truth of her position, although as usual she does not realise it: "To speak of this […] you would need the tongue of a god" (91). Precisely: the word of a god is different from the human word, because it is an *act*.

For Curren, however, any act that is worth the name, that is, one that breaks down the status quo, challenges her fantasy of how real people should behave, is *indecent*. This can be clearly seen in the very image of the act that Curren plans to perpetrate herself, that is, her imagined self-incineration in front of the South African Parliament ("the House of Lies," she calls it) as a protest against apartheid. The idea is toyed with by her for a long time but when she is finally challenged by Vercueil to "do it" ("Then from his jacket pocket he drew a box of matches and held it out to me. 'Do it now,' he said"), she reacts in the following way: "It was like being trapped in a car with a man trying to seduce you and getting cross when you did not give in. It was like being transported back to the worst days of girlhood" (112). Suddenly we are confronted with the stifling shame again, but it is no longer the touchstone of honourable behaviour; it is not a shame which tells Curren what to do, but a shame caused by *doing nothing*. So, is not *this* shame the shame she is dying of, rather than the accumulation of shame she feels because of what the authorities are doing? Because her shame here is not only the accidental shame of being caught with her rhetorical pants down

[8] Jacqueline de Romilly, *La tragédie grecque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 27–28.

and unable to act on her words, but the shame felt for a life of doing nothing, which has been raised to the status of a philosophy of life.

Until the final scene of the "denial" of her American grandchildren, Curren's relationship to death is purely narcissistic. The impulse for her imaginary attempt at self-incineration goes back to her visit in Guguletu – after Bheki is found dead, Curren carries on in her familiar vein: "I no longer cared if I lived. What might happen to me no longer mattered. I thought: My life may as well be waste. We shoot these people as if they are waste, but in the end it is we whose lives are not worth living" (96). The effect is that, in order to find some sense for her existence, she imagines herself burning and thinking in the act: "*How easy to give meaning to one's life*" (129).[9] And, as is usual with her, the melodramatic discourse inevitably takes us right into the middle of the attempted tragic discourse – if we remember that she keeps repeating that her life is a waste because it is a life of shame, there is a clear tragic parallel here with Ajax, who committed suicide because he had disgraced himself by slaughtering a flock of sheep thinking they were Greek warriors, his madness being visited on him by Athena. His suicide is a protest against the shame brought upon him by forces beyond his control. Such classical parallels are priceless for one's narcissism – what could be better than to recognise your identity in the image of a heroic figure, the paragon of the larger-than-life? Yet a surprise waits for Curren here – when she is urged by Vercueil to "do it," she not only feels shame at being unequal to the task, which gives the lie to her imaginary identification, but she also experiences what it would feel like to act – in order to act you have to cease being a "real," "rounded," person: "But how hard it is to kill oneself! One clings so tight to life! It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. *You have to become someone other than yourself*" (109; italics added).

The contemplated suicide fails then, but there is a parallel scene in the novel which may tell us more about the real causes of this failure – perhaps it is not lack of will that stops Curren from killing herself but something quite different. When, after she fails to attempt suicide, she speaks for the second time of her cancer as a result of "the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life," the

[9] In answer to Vercueil's question "What for?" she says, "it has to do with my life. To do with a life that isn't worth much any more. I am trying to work out what I can get for it" (104).

cancer born "from self-loathing" (132), and about her life as waste. Then she has this advice for John: "You are too young for this kind of thing. […] You are throwing away your lives before you know what life can be. What are you – fifteen years old? Fifteen is too young to die. Eighteen is too young. Twenty-one is too young" (131). One can just as well add that for Curren seventy is too young, because in fact what we witness here is her own litany, the litany of a person who, even knowing that she is dying, refuses to accept that knowledge because she has always imagined *herself* as the highest good, and the image of the proper childhood is only a synecdoche for it – as we have already noted, all the harping on the treasures of childhood is related to *her* childhood, not John's or Bheki's, so this long mourning over how the youth throw away their lives thoughtlessly is simply a veiled way of mourning herself and an outcry against the stupidity of approaching death, her own death. Thus the melodramatic underside shows through Curren's tragic discourse – the image of what for the ancients would be an honourable suicide to protest against dishonour and fate becomes just a stand-in for its very opposite: the paralysis of the will in the face of death.

The indecency of any political act finally reappears in Curren's last conversation with Thabane on the telephone when the subject of childhood and struggle comes back. Thabane speaks of action and the youth the way Florence had spoken earlier, but his questioning of Curren's position is put into sharper focus here:

> When you are body and soul in the struggle as these young people are, when you are prepared to lay down your lives for each other without question, then a bond grows up that is stronger than any bond you will know again. That is comradeship. I see it every day with my own eyes. My generation has nothing that can compare. That is why we must stand back for them, for the youth. We stand back but we stand behind them. (136–37)

The family bond (proper childhood, etc.) that is the lifeblood of Curren's sentimental discourse is relegated here to secondary status together with the importance of one's individual (beautiful) heart and soul. This is anathema to Curren and she rolls out her biggest cannons against it:

> The Germans had comradeship, and the Japanese, and the Spartans.[10] Shaka's impis too, I am sure. Comradeship is nothing

[10] The Spartans probably function here as the antithesis of the humane Athenians, whom Curren may perceive as the originators of the care for the beauti-

> but a mystique of death, of killing and dying, masquerading as what you call a bond (a bond of what? Love? I doubt it.). I have no sympathy with this comradeship. You are wrong, you and Florence and everyone else, to be taken in by it and, worse, to encourage it in children. It is just another of those icy, exclusive death-driven male constructions. (137)

And as usual in her arguments the fullness of a "good" life in the world of wonders is juxtaposed against the false abstraction of freedom[11]:

> I still detest these calls for sacrifice that end with young men bleeding to death in the mud. War is never what it pretends to be. Scratch the surface and you find, invariably, old men sending young men to their death in the name of some abstraction or other. (149)

One may wonder whether the scene she witnessed in Guguletu appeared so abstract to her ("*Can this really be happening to me?* I thought. *What am I doing here?* I had a vision of the little green car waiting quietly at the roadside. There was nothing I longed for more than to get into my car, slam the door behind me, close out this looming world of rage and violence" (88–89)). But perhaps it is *her* life behind closed doors between Bach and Brahms which is more abstracted than anything the blacks engaged in the struggle may experience. She has a presentiment of this when she feels herself to be a doll:

> I have intimations older than any memory, unshakeable, that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life. From a cradle a theft took place: a child was taken and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I. […] [Dolls] exist forever in that moment of petrified surprise prior to all recollection when a life was taken away, a life not theirs but in whose place they are left behind as a token. Their knowing a knowledge without substance, without worldly weight, like a doll's head itself, empty, airy. As they themselves are not babies but the ideas of babies, more round, more pink, more blank and

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ful soul, but as every reader of Thucydides knows, under the thin veneer of cultural achievement, they were just as ruthless as the proverbially cruel Spartans.

[11] Curren's point here is especially strange because she does not seem to allow for the real existence of any bond that is not bond of love. Does one have to *love* one's compatriots to feel a national bond? Obviously not. However, there is a certain consistency in her claim because *within the discourse of melodrama* the only bond is the bond of love.

> blue-eyed than a baby could ever be, living not life but an idea of life, immortal, undying like ideas. (100–101)

It is her life, which has been "pure spirit," a total abstraction that had all the messy details of existence swept, or rather forced, out of the frame. Curren likes to invoke love as the opposite of death ("a mystique of death […] masquerading as what you call a bond (a bond of what? Love? I doubt it")) but what is love to her other than an abstract going through the motions of a certain melodramatic discourse which she had learned as appropriate for her class of masters?

We can judge the truth of this discourse especially in the moments when the doll is confronted with the "mess" absent from her life so far, that is, when she is confronted with the real of violence. When Curren comes across Bheki's dead body, this is her highly rhetorical reaction: "If someone had dug a grave for me there and then in the sand, and pointed, I would without a word have climbed in and lain down and folded my hands on my breast. And when the sand fell in my mouth and in the corners of my eyes I would not have lifted a finger to brush it away" (96). This is a veritable discursive flight, not without its charms, and obviously schooled in the tragic authors, especially the Romans with their love of rampant rhetoric and predilection for the tastelessly macabre ("I could have taught you most things Roman, I am not sure about the Greek," says Curren to Vercueil at one point (176)). Yet it is repulsive in its bombastic nerve and we do not have to be aware of her refusal to incinerate herself later in the novel to know that it is "just talk."

The melodramatic discourse is a lie in a deeper sense than just that it is rhetorical hyperbole. Whether it appears in the seemingly benign guise of images of beauty (searching for one's heart's chord, childhood as paradise) or that of the mock-tragic, it serves the violent purpose of making something disappear.

If we take the images of beauty, it is the blacks who simply vanish from them – their unspiritual existence has to be removed from the picture to make it appear beautiful:

> We were photographed, that day, in a garden. […] I recognize the place. It is Uniondale, the house in Church Street bought by my grandfather when ostrich-feathers were booming. Year after year fruit and flowers and vegetables burgeoned in that garden, pouring forth their seed, dying, resurrecting themselves, blessing us with their profuse presence. But by whose love tended? Who clipped the hollyhocks? Who laid the melon-seeds in their warm, moist bed? Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to

> open the sluice and lead water into the garden? If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting in it? (102)

This fragment is a more self-conscious version of all the images of irretrievably past beauty, some of which we have already quoted. All of them have a truly Arnoldian ring. There is an amazing passage in *Culture and Anarchy* in which Arnold admits his shocked surprise at the coming into view of the material underside of his existence: "that vast proportion […] of the working class which, raw and half-developed, has long lain half-hidden amidst its poverty and squalor, and is now issuing from its *hiding-place* to assert an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes, and is beginning to perplex us by marching where it likes, meeting where it likes, bawling what it likes, breaking what it likes."[12] Culture as a properly refined image of life, in other words "sweetness and light" (this Arnoldian phrase seems to have a clearly "Currenian" ring), does not tolerate the ugly materiality necessary for its subsistence – for Arnold, the Populace, the squalor and poverty, have to be returned to their proper place, that is, put outside the picture. This, however, is not done with the idea of finding some way of re-introducing the monster to be viewed in a more acceptable form. Arnold's prescription has to be read to be believed:

> We shall say boldly that we do not at all despair of finding some lasting truth to minister to the diseased spirit of our time; but that we have discovered the best way of finding this to be not so much by lending a hand to our friends and countrymen in their actual operations for the removal of certain definite evils, but rather in getting our friends and countrymen to seek culture, to let their consciousness play freely round their present operations and the stock notions on which they are founded, show what these are like, and how related to the intelligible law of things, and auxiliary to true human perfection.[13]

Not surprisingly, what we have here is another way of prescribing "proper" childhood, a time of wonder – conditions which can be observed only by those leading a life of leisure within the picture – for

[12] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 88; italics added.

[13] Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 164.

those who are forcefully removed from it in order that it form the perfect image of sweetness and light.

So the images of a forfeited beautiful life that Curren would like to go back to ("Let me be granted just one more summer-afternoon walk down the Avenue amid the nut-brown bodies of children on their way home from school," etc.), the images of life as aesthetic pleasure, are not as benign as they look, because their function is to erase black life from view. In other words, they are superimposed on the real of sheer violence Curren encounters in Guguletu in order to make it disappear from one's field of vision ("I have not see black people in their death before […]. They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy" (114)). But the political reality erased from the life of the Beautiful Soul is one in which a part of the population does the dirty work (in both senses of, on the one hand, chicken slaughter, etc. and, on the other, the repressive apparatus in all its guises) in order that the rest may live their liberal life like Curren as good people upholding their family values ("For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly-good") who certainly condemn the atrocities perpetrated in their name.

Yet another side of the same discourse of melodramatic values is what we have already called the mock-tragic. When violence knocks at the liberal door, when it bursts into the picture, as sooner or later it must, there are always many related strategies for neutralising the trauma: one can resort to rhetorical tragic grandeur ("If someone had dug a grave for me there and then in the sand, and pointed," etc.), or even better to a presentation of life as ruled by a number of tragic universals which are supposed to describe the human condition as fate ("The lively ones are picked off, the stolid ones survive," Curren thinks of Bheki and John (123–24)[14]), and finally to accusations of propagating the mystique of death, in other words, of perpetrating evil. What, however, if within the horizon of Curren's life any act as such is evil?

Although Curren presents herself as speaking from the life-affirming position that is hostile to any ideology and thus denounces "death-driven male constructions" which are to her of purely ideologi-

[14] Don't *these* mock-universal truths deserve the name of "death-driven [female?] constructions"?

cal nature, her place of enunciation is created by a gesture which is ideology at its purest:

> The fundamental ideological gesture consists in providing an image for this structural "evil." The gap opened by an act (i.e. the unfamiliar, "out-of-place" effect of an act) is immediately linked in this ideological gesture to an *image*. As a rule this is an image of suffering, which is then displayed to the public alongside this question: *Is this what you want?* And this question already implies the answer: *It would be impossible, inhuman, for you to want this!* Here we have to insist on theoretical rigour, and separate this (usually fascinating) image exhibited by ideology from the real source of uneasiness – from the "evil" which is not an "undesired," "secondary" effect of the good but belongs, on the contrary, to its essence. We could even say that the ethical ideology struggles against "evil" because this ideology is hostile to the "good," to the logic of the act as such.[15]

Curren's world is a world of inaction and pseudo-acts and she freely admits to the reason for it: "This car is old, it belongs to a world that barely exists any more, but it works. What is left of that world, what still works, I am trying to hold on to. Whether I love it or hate it does not matter" (65). Yet, although she forgets to add that this world has all along been also the world of her aesthetic life which is materially founded on the politics of apartheid, she knows that the accusation is inevitable and thus she tries another version of her former defence. While talking to John, she presents a kind of *apologia* to him, too:

> You say, […] I don't want to listen to the story of how you feel, it is just another story, why don't you *do* something?" […] There is nothing I can reply but "Yes" when you put that question to me. But let me tell you what it is like to utter that "Yes." It is like being on trial for your life and being allowed only two words, Yes and No. Whenever you take a breath to speak out, you are warned by the judges: "Yes or No: no speeches." "Yes," you say. Yet all the time you feel other words stirring inside you like life in the womb. […] You do not believe in words. You think only blows are real, blows and bullets. But listen to me: can't you hear that the words I speak are real? Listen! They may only be air but they come from my heart, from my womb. They are not Yes and they are not No. What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled. (132–33)

[15] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 95.

The whole speech (of which only a part is quoted here) takes us back to Guguletu where Curren was also "put on trial" and refused to condemn violence in somebody else's words, as only her own words would name the truth. Now in the peace and quiet of her house she is striving for this word and although she does not name it here we have already come across it earlier in the novel: " 'Are you going to do it [incinerate herself]?' asked Vercueil, his man-eyes gleaming. 'Yes-no,' I should have answered. […] Yes-no: every woman knows what it means as it defeats every man" (106). One is tempted here to give oneself to Curren's habit of finding a parallel from the classics: wouldn't it be the image of Circe herself defeating men by providing them with the fulfilment of their wishes and this way turning them into pigs? Wouldn't accepting the lure of a never-never land of her vision of Edenic childhood and charmed evenings under the eucalyptus trees mean being turned into a pig precisely by becoming the traitor of the bond Thabane spoke of on the phone and because of that also the traitor of *black* family values, of the parents who are proud of their children who are like iron?[16] And, finally, wouldn't it all mean turning oneself into the "pig" himself, that is, the policeman protecting the image of childhood Curren keeps projecting, the childhood that is accessible to the masters only?

Such is the obscene underside of the discourse of melodrama we witness throughout the novel which has already been judged by the chorus of Guguletu ("This woman talks shit"), a discourse which propagates the heart (not stunted, then white), the womb (the white womb – the black mother, Florence, denies that discourse), and the preciousness of every individual (but mostly of the "real people," therefore not of the "iron" black youth involved in the struggle against apartheid). Melodrama is the lifeblood of Curren's discourse and it is only within it that she can utter heart and womb. Because of this, we can see how what was supposed to be her ownmost word, her truth, turns into the mechanical platitudinous discourse of the Beautiful Soul – what Curren comes up with as her own words are words determined in advance and spoken not by her but by the melodramatic master signifier (family values, etc.) that she identifies with.

But perhaps this paradox of the inside (one's ownmost core of subjectivity) which turns out to coincide with the outside (the pure mechanicity of a melodramatic discourse) is not a paradox at all.

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[16] " 'They are making you into a dog!' said the boy [John to the drunk Vercueil]. 'Do you want to be a dog?' " (42) – dog being here the equivalent of pig. We will return to this matter.

Taking into consideration its mechanicity, it is not surprising that Curren's argument has already been rehearsed and in front of the same audience. When Curren visits John in the hospital she supports her plea (or is it injunction?) "Be slow to judge" with the same claim that "given time to speak, we would all claim to be exceptions. For each of us there is a case to be made" (73). But this time she accompanies this platitude with a disturbing image that forms in her mind:

> I, a white. When I think of the whites, what do I see? I see a herd of sheep (not a flock: a herd) milling around on a dusty plain under the baking sun. I hear a drumming of hooves, a confusion of sound which resolves itself, when the ear grows attuned, into the same bleating call in a thousand different inflections: "I! I! I!" And, cruising among them, bumping them aside with their bristling flanks, lumbering, saw-toothed, red-eyed, the savage, unreconstructed old boars grunting "Death!" "Death!" (72–73)

A nice, although slightly too melodramatic, image of white South Africa, interesting not because of its poetic power but because of making "death" the echo of "I" – I, the exception: "swimming lessons, riding lessons, ballet lessons; cricket on the lawn; lives passed within walled gardens guarded by bulldogs; children of paradise, blond, innocent, shining with angelic light, soft as *putti*. Their residence the limbo of the unborn, their innocence the innocence of bee-grubs, plump and white, drenched in honey, absorbing sweetness through their soft skins. Slumbrous their souls, bliss-filled, abstracted" (6–7).

Once again the world of the Beautiful Soul, the world where one looks for one's heart's chord, turns out to be just the reverse image of the world of death in both of its incarnations. Firstly, the limbo of bliss in which one's soul *disappeared* and what is left is the doll cultivating not the soul but *the idea of the soul* whose coordinates were laid down for it a long time before it was born and whose only substance or activity is going through the motions of the assigned rituals (riding lessons, swimming lessons, etc., Bach and Brahms included) – a clockwork rather than an exception. Secondly, the sheer violence of the boars which are just the ugly but inevitable condition of the possibility of such bliss ("for nothing comes without its price" (129)).

Where, therefore, is the real soul to be located? In other words, where is this piece of infinity that makes us human, something removed from the obscene realm of images of the good? Curren is very close to naming it unknowingly when she speaks deprecatingly of

freedom (for her, probably another representative of death-driven male constructions): "I have no idea what freedom is, Mr Vercueil. I am sure Bheki and his friend had no idea either. Perhaps freedom is always and only what is unimaginable" (150). Although she probably means to make of freedom something akin to the ineffable – some truth that is out there but which human language is unable to utter and therefore it must melancholically strive for without being able to attain it – she is closer to the truth that she imagines, because freedom is unimaginable in the same way that it is infinite.

"To speak of this […] you would need the tongue of a god," Curren said in Guguletu, the words of a god being those that create or change something, that is, words that are tantamount to an act. However, in order to act in the proper sense of the word (not just swimming, riding, or playing cricket) one would have to relinquish one's image of oneself as a precious treasure of "I, the exception." In other words, the subject would have to change in the radical sense of relinquishing its fundamental fantasy, its heart's chord. To find the words of a god the subject has to do what within the framework of his identification so far is considered impossible, often equated with what is inhuman. Curren has already had an intimation of what it means to act when she reflected on the difficulty of killing oneself: "It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. You have to become someone other than yourself" (109). In order to accomplish an act one has to place oneself in the position of the infinite, the place in which one is no longer determined by the discourse which equates "what is" (the imaginary state of things) with the real. In other words, one has to take the position of "God," that is, one who has a choice, one who is not totally determined by his social conditions and upbringing. Paradoxically, however, becoming "God" means also becoming "a thing," "something thoughtless" because in order for freedom to assert itself an act has to be committed which will disintegrate the old ego and the image of the world it has, or rather the image of the world it incarnates – thus the new subject is "'realised,' 'objectified' in this act."[17] In this sense, there is no subject in the act: the "old" subjectivity is destroyed precisely by the act itself, while the "new" subjectivity is the outcome of the act so it is not yet "present" in it.

We can also explain what is at stake here by means of a difference which Kierkegaard, in a different context, tried to describe,

[17] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 104.

distinguishing between reminiscence and repetition. Reminiscence is the Socratic process of reading in which you try to identify the truth of who you already and "really" are – when you are looking for your heart's chord, or trying to find your own words to name your own truth. In contrast to this, what constitutes the core of repetition is the encounter with a traumatic event that comes from the *outside* and which you allow to hit you at the very centre of your identity. Kierkegaard's famous example here is, of course, faith. Faith does not obey the logic of cause and effect because one can never be argued into believing; it is always a blind leap beyond one's conscious control. Yet the image we encounter here is not the gentrified one, which is usually retailed as something good for one's identity, morality, "humanity" and soul, but faith at its most traumatic and therefore amoral, inhuman and unstomachable, which we encounter in God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son or in the story of Job. The point is, of course, that although ultimately Abraham did not have to kill Isaac and prosperity was returned to Job, they did not come out of their experiences as the same men: in a sense, Abraham did kill his son, because he took the decision to do it and in doing that he had to kill the very kernel of his identity – something that Curren would call his soul – because for him his son had been his highest good. Abraham did the impossible (within his horizon of values), and in order to be able to do it he had to destroy his identity, had to become someone other than himself; therefore, after the fact, he enters a new dispensation: he has to rebuild his identity again from scratch (in Lacanian terminology, he traversed his fantasy).[18] In order to be willing to kill Isaac, he has to pass over to the side of the object,[19] that is, to relinquish who he is and identify himself with the act (the thing done), the act with which his new identity starts.

Taking into consideration Curren's ceaseless anti-apartheid rhetoric, the only logical act for her would be to identify with the black struggle by traversing her fantasy of innocence and childhood, an image which hides behind itself sheer political violence of colonialism. This, however, is something she avoids at all costs because it would mean the loss of her Beautiful Soul, of which she is so proud. Thus her confusion or bad faith can be clearly exemplified by another recurring piece of her rhetoric – she calls the black youth "dour little puritans, despising laughter, despising play" (114) and inveighs against

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[18] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 212.

[19] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 104.

"the spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa. Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold, rubbing his hands in the afterworld, smiling his wintry smile" (47). However, it is precisely her own attitude, which goes back to the spirit of Geneva with its puritan examination of the state of one's soul and diligent watch for the signs of redemption (attention paid to one's soul in times inhospitable to the soul). Isn't the presentation of the image of a childhood that only the masters can have as a necessary precondition of being human an exact South African liberal parallel of the doctrine of predestination?

Unable "to become somebody else," Curren devises a half-measure, a pseudo-act. In order to "save her soul," she invents another melodramatic strategy: "How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. […] I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love for instance this child [John]. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is here for a reason. He is part of my salvation" (125). As we have already noted, in the discourse of melodrama the only thing one can do is to love.

It is telling that she presents her new vocation as the saving of her soul – her Beautiful Soul, one may add. Rather that lose her fantasmatic identification by becoming "somebody else" and getting a "better" soul in return, she comes up with a way of refurbishing her old specular image, which means that her new program boils down to nothing more than to the saving of her *face*. However, the child she speaks of is not amenable to her love since, as we already know, he is the representative of everything that Curren's liberal soul abhors – in loving him she would have to love his "stupidity" (which is Curren's name for his struggle: "There is something stupid about him, something deliberately stupid, obstructive, intractable") because he basically *is* his struggle, as Curren knows very well for she turns it into an accusation against him: "A simplified person, simplified in every way: swifter, nimbler, more tireless than real people, without doubts or scruples, without humour, ruthless, innocent" (71–72). And her failure to love is clearly shown by her already-quoted ironic comment on John's death: "Poor John, who in the old days would have been destined to be a garden boy and eat bread and jam for lunch at the back door and drink out of a tin, battling now for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa!" (138). But if the task of loving the unlovable is impossible with a black insurgent, there is somebody else at hand who would fit perfectly as an object of love ministration – Vercueil, who will not mind being turned into somebody who is there *for a reason*.

Vercueil's biggest asset is his blackness, so "loving" him immediately refurbishes Curren's waning image of herself as a compassionate liberal. What is more, loving Vercueil seems to imply accomplishment of the difficult task of overcoming of her rarefied sensibility for the sake of the other, since he is a dirty and smelly alcoholic with the objectionable habit of bringing his drunken "girlfriends" home. And, thirdly, he appears in Curren's life on the same day that she receives the news of being past saving, which must have had an impact on her sentimental imagination and encouraged her to act against her rational better judgement: she so often denies the seriousness of her pet idea of his being the messenger, the angel sent to show her the way out of this world, that the very repetition suggests that she actually takes the conceit seriously. (Vercueil is also *made* into the messenger by Curren herself since the day after he arrives she starts to write the letter of confession to her daughter which Vercueil will be asked to post after Curren's death.)

The reason that Vercueil is a black that Curren is able to accommodate, that is, one she can "love" without changing herself, is that in many respects he reflects to her her own image, a somehow distorted mirror likeness but one which can help her self-recognition none the less, unlike the black youth from the township who are intractably resistant to being used in boosting some white self-representation.

While Curren's first advice to John is "Be slow to judge" (72) – since his judgement of her that she is not a compassionate bleeding heart but an oppressor is a traumatic presence that threatens Curren's liberal self-image – Vercueil is one who "watches but does not judge. Always a faint haze of alcohol about him. Alcohol, that softens, preserves. […] That helps us to forgive" (75). This softness is the core of the parallel but it does not really stand for "goodness" – Curren can identify with Vercueil so easily because like her he is a lotus-eater, permanently lost in a limbo of Edenic existence: "[a] man in his middle years still sucking on bottles, yearning for the original bliss, reaching for it in his stupors" (53). In other words, he is a mirror image of Curren's "aesthetic" approach to life, a life in pursuit of "wonder," of the upsurges of the Beautiful Soul but within the framework of the possibilities allowed in South Africa to blacks. His life is in this respect a caricature of the blissful life of whites, Curren included, but a caricature only because his kind of bliss (alcoholic intoxication) is the only kind within the reach of his race. What is more, by being the incarnation of the only life of wonder accessible to blacks in South Africa, Vercueil is at the same time not a caricature at all, but the real image of what Curren (admittedly

without realising it) would like John and Bheki to turn into, presenting them with Edenic images of what their childhood should be (the childhood they can never have as blacks) – not bearing in mind the real choices allowed to them under apartheid, her Circe's voice lures them precisely into choosing the life led by Vercueil.

This is something the black boys seem to grasp much more clearly than the aged university lecturer and hence their aggression towards Vercueil: " 'They are making you into a dog!' said the boy [John]. 'Do you want to be a dog?' " (42) They see in him their own fallen image and it is not death they find the most degrading (which is Curren's case) but living a life which is the spitting image of that of their former masters. Therefore, by choosing the struggle (death) rather than this kind of life they stand the Hegelian dialectics of the slave and the master on its head, and by spurning the melodramatic (but in fact obscene) vision offered to them by Curren they choose what the discourse of tragedy would call heroic status.

What is more, it is precisely this which puts them in the position of truth since truth, if we may resort to Heidegger's idea for a moment, "is neither 'subjective' [one's heart's chord] nor 'objective' [the music of the spheres]: it designates simultaneously our active engagement *in* and our ecstatic openness *to* the world."[20] The conjunction, however, has to be thought as simultaneity, that is: active engagement is ecstatic openness as such. Therefore the praising of openness to the world *without* engagement is nothing other than to preach the old metaphysical dichotomies between the subjective and the objective, soul and body and so on, which is, of course, what Curren always does, propagating her aesthetic attitude. However, as Hegel, the first critic of the Beautiful Soul, had already noted (writing on tragedy!), this kind of position is accessible only in the state of idleness and only to "the gods" living in their artificial paradise of the masters: "The substance of ethical life, as a concrete unity, is an ensemble of *different* relations and powers which only in a situation of inactivity, like that of the blessed gods, accomplish the work of the spirit in the enjoyment of an undisturbed life."[21] The ethical substance can abide in this state "solely on Olympus and in the heaven of imagination and religious ideas,"[22] and when it comes to realise itself in the world it can only be through the "mess" Curren so ab-

[20] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000), 79.

[21] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), II, 1196.

[22] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1196.

hors: "When they now come actually to life as a specific 'pathos' in a human individual, [the gods] lead, despite all their justification, to guilt and wrong."[23] In other words, the ethical action leads through the images of suffering but these images are only melodramatic images of the Beautiful Soul who exists in the imaginary heaven of insubstantial fantasy.

This aspect of Vercueil, which is so infuriating for the boys, is his other asset in Curren's eyes – since she describes her life as a life of shame, Vercueil is a perfect image to hold on to, since as a derelict he is a veritable figure of shame and hence can be appropriated as the angel whom she imagines to be her guide: "So I have continued to tell myself stories in which you lead, I follow. […] The angel goes before, the woman follows. His eyes are open, he sees; hers are shut, she is still sunk in the sleep of worldliness. That is why I keep turning to you for guidance, for help" (153).

Another typical liberal-melodramatic attitude is illustrated here. The sentimental imagination has always had a certain fascination with the figure of the *clochard* romanticised as a sage or a visionary, which is testified by many products of western culture, from *Les Misérables* to recent Hollywood films. The source of this is, of course, the romantic imagination, which made the child, the madman, and the poet into the characters more intimately related to the truth than other mortals. Hence, for Curren, Vercueil keeps metamorphosing between a child (mumbling like a child in bed (52), sucking on bottles (53), etc.), a guide who sees more than herself, and a proper Byronic hero carrying some dark mystery from his past in his heart ("You are hiding something, I thought, but what? A tragic love? A prison sentence?" (76)). But all this effort of the imagination is only to cover up the satisfaction that his status as a victim brings to his benefactor, a victim towards whom we can feel compassion but only as long as he remains a victim (unlike the township youth). So none of the games Curren plays with him concern his "substance" at all because they are profoundly narcissistic – they are played so that she can save face in her own eyes or in the eyes of her daughter.

The whole purpose of the "wager on trust" ("Because I cannot trust Vercueil I must trust him," which is another form of the game: "I must love, first of all, the unlovable") can be seen as a way "to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul" (119), the image of her soul being, as we have tried to show, the reverse side of colonial violence. Therefore, it is not surprising that the "nature"

[23] Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 1196.

of Vercueil is described by Curren in terms quite similar to those in which she describes whites *as different from blacks*, the whites whose deaths are not messy and heavy as iron, as black deaths are, but who die "in bed, growing rather dry and light there, rather papery, rather airy" (114) – just like them: "He [Vercueil] is dry. His drink is not water but fire. Perhaps this is why I cannot imagine children of his: because his semen would be dry […] like pollen or like the dust of this country" (179–80).

This is, therefore, what happens to iron when alcohol dissolves it – it turns into pollen and melts into thin air, leaving an empty place enabling white narcissistic projections. It is precisely what the blacks engaged in the struggle despise: being turned into mere metaphors, word games, a way for the whites to boost their self-respect.[24] To quote one of Curren's favourite accusations: "The new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule. Abhorring alcohol, that softens the rule, dissolves iron. Suspicious of all that is idle, yielding, roundabout. Suspicious of devious discourse like this" (75). She inveighs against such kind of "coarseness," calling it the coming of the age of iron, referring us to Ovid (Hesiod too but her preferred identification is with the Romans, as we have noted) who speaks of it this way:

> Hard steel succeeded [the age of bronze] then:
> And stubborn as the metal, were the men.
> Truth, modesty, and shame, the world forsook:
> Fraud, avarice, and force, their places took.

As the novel progresses, however, the iron which at first sight seems to figure the coldness and cruelty of "the new puritans" (forsaking "truth, modesty, and shame" which are Curren's favourite references) progressively becomes a sign of something much less metaphoric: "these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig iron or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever. Leave them long enough and they may sink, millimetre by millimetre, till the earth closes over them. But then they would sink no further. They would stay there, bobbing just under the surface" (114).

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[24] "Word-games, from a past that I alone could look back to with nostalgia, when we of the middle classes, the comfortable classes, passed our Sundays roaming the countryside from beauty-spot to beauty-spot, bringing the afternoon to a close with tea and scones and strawberry jam and cream in a tea-room with a nice view, preferably westward over the sea" (63).

So what is this something that floats just under the skin of the South African earth, "the age of iron waiting to return" (115)? Curren, horrified, states it herself: "this torrent of black blood […]. A country prodigal of blood. […] The dry earth soaking up the blood of its creatures. A land that drinks rivers of blood and is never sated" (57–58). It is this blood which iron figures because, unlike white "airiness," it is "heavy blood. […] So much blood! If I had caught it all I would not have been able to lift the bucket. Like trying to lift a bucket of lead" (114). Thus, it is not surprising that this vision of the age of blood also finds its expression in Ovid:

> Then sails were spread, to every wind that blew.
> Raw were the sailors, and the depths were new:
> Trees, rudely hollow'd, did the waves sustain;
> E're ships in triumph plough'd the watry plain.
> Then land-marks limited to each his right:
> For all before was common as the light.
> Nor was the ground alone requir'd to bear
> Her annual income to the crooked share,
> But greedy mortals, rummaging her store,
> Digg'd from her entrails first the precious oar;
> Which next to Hell, the prudent Gods had laid;
> And that alluring ill, to sight display'd.
> Thus cursed steel, and more accursed gold,
> Gave mischief birth, and made that mischief bold:
> And double death did wretched Man invade,
> By steel assaulted, and by gold betray'd.[25]

One can read here a pertinent and laconic description of the development of colonialism, which was, moreover, more or less coterminous with the highest cultural achievements of, to use an Eliotian phrase, the mind of Europe, in the products of which Curren is so deeply steeped. Thus what we arrive at finally is the most interesting juxtaposition taking place in the novel between the black blood bobbing just under the surface of the earth and "the Goldberg Variations [which] erected themselves in the air" (26)[26] which coexist there *without touching* but which mirror each other like South African earth and sky, since the airy kingdom is just a product of violent sublimation, of the imaginary refining of black blood out of exist-

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[25] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Samuel Garth, John Dryden, et al., eBooks@ Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library: 11 Nov. 2006, <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/mirror/classics.mit.edu/Ovid/metam.1.first.html>.

[26] Also called "celestial music," "the music that does not die," "pure spirit" (20–21).

ence, turning it into insubstantial pollen that vanishes into thin air. Both of these spaces are kingdoms of the dead – on the one hand, the "airy" dead, the dead of pure spirit represented by Bach and the music of the spheres, and, on the other, the black blood floating just under the surface of the earth.

And here the final return to tragedy is in order: there the dead do not go away but prey upon the living – in tragedy, the return and the importunate demands of the corpses become the form of fate.[27] Thus in the dying Curren there is a battle raging between the two spaces of death, and although in her waking life she worships the airy Apollonian gods, when she falls asleep she is brought downwards and her feet are riveted to the earth and submerged to the ankles in the bloodbath of Borodino:

> When I fall asleep there commences a restless movement of shapes behind my eyelids, shapes without body or form, covered in a haze, grey or brown, sulphurous. *Borodino* is the word that comes to me in my sleep: a hot summer afternoon on the Russian plain, smoke everywhere, the grass dry and burning, two hosts that have lost all cohesion plodding about, parched, in terror of their lives. Hundreds of thousands of men, faceless, voiceless, dry as bones, trapped on a field of slaughter, repeating night after night their back-and-forth march across that scorched plain in the stench of sulphur and blood: a hell into which I plummet when I close my eyes. (126)

Not being able to resolve itself on this level, that of the "sulphurous horror" into which she plunges in her sleep, the conflict intensifies and starts entering her waking life in the form of attacks of "madness" that from a certain moment start plaguing her, and she describes them thus:

> Clouds come over, thoughts begin to bunch, to take on the dense, angry life of a swarm of flies. I shake my head, trying to clear them away. This is my hand, I say, opening my eyes wide, staring at the veins on the back of my hand; this is the bedspread. Then as quick as lightning something strikes. In an instant I am gone and in another instant I am back, still staring at my hand. Between these instants an hour may have passed or the blink of an eye, during which I have been absent, gone, struggling with something thick and rubbery that invades the mouth and grips the tongue at its root, something that comes from the depths of the sea. I surface, shaking my head like a swimmer. In my throat is a taste of bile,

[27] Jan Kott, *Zjadanie bogów* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 9–10.

> of sulphur. Madness! I say to myself: this is what it tastes like to be mad! (167)

As in ancient tragedy the offended gods visit madness on the hero, here the gods of black blood which has been refined out of existence come from the depths of the repressed sea of blood and grip Curren by the throat. And thus finally the trauma forces her to commit an *act* of judgement and, as usual at first without realising it, pronounce the verdict of the struggle in an appropriately mythological way: "Once I came to myself facing the wall. In my hand was a pencil, its point broken. All over the wall were sprawling, sliding characters, meaningless, coming from me or *someone inside me*" (167; italics added).[28] The biblical parallel here is unmistakable: the most famous incomprehensible writing on the wall appears in the Book of Daniel, the script that comes to disturb a beautiful life of leisure and abundance founded on blood:

> Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, whiles he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. (Daniel 5, 1–6)

And when nobody is able to translate the writing, Daniel is sent for and explains it thus:

> And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God

[28] Also to judge oneself, one has to become somebody foreign to oneself: "But how hard it is to kill oneself! […] It seems to me that something other than the will must come into play at the last instant, something foreign, something thoughtless, to sweep you over the brink. *You have to become someone other than yourself*" (109; italics added).

> hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; *Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting*. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. (Daniel 5, 25–28; italics added)[29]

By analogy Curren's own verdict on her *apologia* for her aesthetic existence is that, notwithstanding her liberal good heart and soul, when weighed against the heaviness of black blood, it is found in the balance all too light.

Until the final pages of the novel, Curren seems to repress this insight but something of this unconscious, "mad" knowledge finally breaks through to assert its presence in her conscious mind – as we have noted, in the final pages of the book, her relationship to her daughter and grandchildren in the U.S. is radically altered: the sentimental championing of family values, and the precedence of the preciousness of every human individual over all other claims, disintegrate and naked animosity surfaces: "It dispirits me that your children will never drown. […] They will die at seventy-five or eighty-five as stupid as when they were born" (178–79). Is this a verdict passed on the grandchildren she has never laid her eyes on? It rather looks like the final judgement passed *on her own life* as a colonial doll living in the limbo of the unborn – the pastoral world of beauty and abundance – projected onto the U.S. which still seems to be a safe place, unlike South Africa where she is dying together with her country. So ultimately we return yet again into the space of tragedy to find Curren reluctantly admitting to no less than Oedipus' guilt: the crime which brought the plague of shame on me was not somebody else's doing (the authorities') but my own.

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[29] *The Bible, King James Version*, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library: 11 Nov. 2006, <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccernew2?id=KjvDani.sgm &images=images/mo deng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=5& division=div1>.

The Master of Petersburg (1994)

Although all Coetzee's works are very much involved in intertextual play with the tradition of the European novel, and some of them (e.g. *Foe*) develop this involvement to a remarkable extent, *The Master of Petersburg* is a special case in Coetzee's writing up to this date, not only because it takes as its protagonist a writer emotionally and technically seemingly light years away from Coetzee, but also because it is a rather sophisticated third degree palimpsest.

In *The Master of Petersburg*, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky comes from Dresden to Petersburg in October 1869 to mourn the recent death of his stepson Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev and retrieve from the police what is left of the young man's papers and possessions. The death is officially presented as suicide but the police, knowing that Isaev was involved in the revolutionary circle led by Sergei Gennadevich Nechaev, harbour the suspicion that Isaev was killed by his own comrades. This circumstance, of course, immediately brings to mind one of the subplots we come across in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* where the leader of the revolutionary cell, Peter Verkhovensky, in order to cement the secret bond, makes the members kill one of them, a student named Shatov, who has become dubious of Verkhovensky's credentials for leadership. Moreover, Dostoevsky's source for the characters of Shatov and Verkhovensky was the detailed press coverage of the trial of members of a revolutionary cell. In 1869, at the instigation of their leader Sergei Nechaev, they had lured into the park of the Academy of Agriculture one of their number, Ivan Ivanov, who suspected Nechaev of being a liar (he presented himself as an emissary of a revolutionary organisation widely spread throughout

Russia, which was not true), had killed him and sunk the body in a nearby pond.[1]

Historical facts, however, are not to be treated as sound currency in *The Master of Petersburg* because Coetzee adds a twist to this multilayered story: he casts another historical character, Dostoevsky's stepson Pavel Isaev, in the role of the victim while the historical Isaev actually outlived his stepfather. What is more – and here may lie the real perversity of the undertaking – for all we know, Isaev was a "disgrace" and a constant source of worries for his stepfather not because of his revolutionary activities, but precisely the opposite, because of his egotism, idleness and sponging habits.

In Coetzee's "version," Dostoevsky[2] comes to Petersburg to make good a promise he had made to his stepson Pavel: "*I will come back* […]. *You will not be abandoned*."[3] But the boy is dead, and it might seem that all promises have died with him and their relation is dissolved. Not for Dostoevsky, however. He rents the room last occupied by the boy – or rather the young man: when Pavel dies he is twenty-one – and waits for him to appear: "He stands by the door, hardly breathing, concentrating his gaze on the chair in the corner, waiting for the darkness to thicken, to turn into another kind of darkness, a darkness of presence. Silently he forms his lips over his son's name, three times, four times" (5). Dostoevsky imagines himself to be a kind of Orpheus: "A gate has closed behind his son, a gate bound sevenfold with bands of iron. To open that gate is the labour laid upon him" (19). But he is a strange kind of Orpheus, who does nothing and just waits for the dead one to come and present himself in order that he may redeem his guilt by asking him forgiveness for not having loved him enough; in other words, to come back from the dead to his stepfather and *save* him.

On the level of common sense, Dostoevsky comes to Petersburg to assuage the guilt that haunts him. In order to do this, he has to cause Pavel to be buried not only corporeally but also symbolically; the symbolic debt has to be paid in order that his haunting by guilt should stop. This, however, cannot easily be done, and not only because Dostoevsky's attitude towards his deceased stepson is more convoluted that he would like to admit. Although the writer would

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[1] Stanisław Mackiewicz, *Dostojewski* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1957), 205.

[2] From now on, unless otherwise stated, the name Dostoevsky will refer to Coetzee's fictional character.

[3] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Minerva, 1995), 5. Further references in the body of the text; unless indicated otherwise, all italics are Coetzee's.

very much like to play out the relation with his stepson on strictly personal grounds of the sentimental, sometimes even melodramatic, attachments between father and son, the debt that remains to be paid is actually not intimate but interpersonal, because the circumstances of Pavel's death are unclear: although the official verdict is that he committed suicide, the police hint that he was killed by Nechaev, and Nechaev in turn maintains it was by the police. If Dostoevsky hopes ever to be freed from guilt, he has to resolve the contradictions of this situation in order, first of all, to ascertain the nature of symbolic debt involved in this knot of circumstances. In other words, he has to decide whose version of the truth he should choose, in what way he can stay true to Pavel after his death. Accomplishing it has less to do with solving a criminal riddle and a lot with deciding who Pavel really was. Therefore the task before him is mainly to answer the question, "What does/did Pavel want?" and only secondarily, "Who killed him?"

Dostoevsky's first step may appear weird and enigmatic, but for all we know about him (both in Coetzee's novel and also from the "real" writer's books), it is the easiest and most natural one for him to take. At the beginning of his visit, Petersburg presents itself to him as a vast and dark tomb which he enters to find the body of his stepson lying there shorn of everything, even his name (his grave is marked only with a number), stigmatised by his implied suicide, a man disgraced in the eyes of all but his stepfather.[4] Situating Pavel in the symbolically well-established place of a sensitive and innocent victim, Dostoevsky can easily fall into the old tracks of the discourse he is known for and write another chapter of his "Christology" in order to attempt to answer the enigmatic question ("What does Pavel want?") in the most facile way:

> *Because* it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer

[4] In this way Pavel bears a resemblance to the "ugly" image of dead Christ painted by Hans Holbein. Prince Muishkin in *The Idiot* comments that it is an image which can make many lose their faith in Christ ("That picture! That picture!" cried Muishkin, struck by a sudden idea. "Why, a man's faith might be ruined by looking at that picture!"; 2 Jan 2007: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext01/idiot10.txt>). The historical Dostoevsky saw this painting in Basel in 1867.

> to what he does not expect. (80) […] He is waiting for a sign, and he is betting (there is no grander word he dare use) that the dog is not the sign, is not a sign at all, is just a dog among many dogs howling in the night. But he knows too that as long as he tries by cunning to distinguish things that are things from things that are signs he will not be saved (83) […] Pavel will not be saved till he has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought *the least thing*, the beggarmen and the beggarwomen too, and much else he does not yet know of; and even then there will be no certainty. (82)[5]

Yet the subject of this question is actually no longer Pavel, since his image has migrated to the region of parable as a shadowy creature of the biblical "thief in the night" type. For Dostoevsky, the question about Pavel imperceptibly turns here into "What does Christ want (from me)?" which is much easier to answer, although the answer may have its own problems, because, as we can see, it can only be formulated in contradictory apophatic language. What is more, the apophatic formulation of this question, its very "darkness," that is, difficulty, is precisely where it facility lies – such a form of the question is the easiest way for Dostoevsky to gloss over the complications of the "superficial" dimension of Pavel's life (revolution, police, etc.) since the apophatic surely must signal a more elevated level of meaning. Hence the parable, in which, for Dostoevsky, the distasteful "darkness" of Pavel's engaged life (in which his stepfather had no place and which therefore cannot be played out sentimentally) becomes swaddled in the "darkness" of the apophatic where Pavel is safely removed from being the enervating young man who strongly resented Dostoevsky and turns into a featureless "neighbour" (*the least thing*) in the image of Christ. Hence Dostoevsky predilection for sentimentalising Pavel when speaking (either to himself or to others) from the position of the father, a position whose truth sometimes comes to the fore in short outbursts of resentment against his stepson when his sentimentalising is questioned.

This is the approach Dostoevsky tries first: situating Pavel in Christ's position he does answer the dog's call and does take the beggar to his bed, hoping for revelation and forgiveness to appear. Yet the trick does not work. It is not only that Pavel materialises neither "personally" nor in his sleep ("Never before has time passed so sluggishly, never has the air been so blank of revelation" (88)) but, what is more, instead of ascending towards the sublime that has been pre-

[5] The wavering between "he [Dostoevsky] will not be saved" and "Pavel will not be saved" is telling. We will come back to this.

pared by Dostoevsky's apophatic discourse, the whole situation begins to get out of hand and slide toward the ridiculous: the "beggar" (a police spy named Ivanov), leering obscenely at Dostoevsky, returns to him his own discourse treating him to assorted bits of apophatic wisdom ("Even if it isn't in Scripture, would it not be in the spirit of Scripture: that we deserve what we do not deserve? What do you think?" (89) "I may not be a proper holy simpleton, but that does not disqualify me from speaking the truth. Truth can come, you know, in winding and mysterious ways" (89)). Coming from Ivanov, however, this type of discourse is dismissed ("Charlatan! He [Dostoevsky] thinks" (88)), since it is difficult to sentimentalise over this dirty, smelly, pudgy, worn-down man. But may not the disgust Dostoevsky feels towards him also be a sign of another kind of identity he wants to deny? Ivanov is quite happy to make a show of his grief in front of others; in fact, it seems that mourning is precisely the state that allows him to enjoy himself in ways quite resembling what happens to Dostoevsky in *The Master of Petersburg*: "Tears are rolling down his cheeks. He wipes them away with his cuff, but more flow. He seems to have no trouble in talking while he cries. In fact, he seems quite cheerful. 'I believe I will grieve for my lost babies for the rest of my days,' he says" (87).

Having indulged in the apophatic trick Dostoevsky is confronted with a different possibility of locating the question he asks himself about Pavel. When he comes to the police station to reclaim Pavel's papers, which have been taken in for investigation, he is presented with the evidence of his stepson's involvement in a revolutionary group, the People's Vengeance, led by Nechaev. Now the symbolic debt that is to be paid unexpectedly appears to be located in a discourse completely different from the one expected by Dostoevsky. This is a harder version of the question, a version he doggedly keeps dismissing as the result of Pavel's naivety and political gullibility. But there is more to it than just Dostoevsky's political or ideological disagreement with the revolutionaries. Dostoevsky may be the most fervent propagator of the supremacy of Orthodox Christianity and the Russian monarchy but even he is semi-conscious, in his convoluted way, of a different level of confrontation hidden behind his elevated words about Jesus and the Russian people.

When Councillor Maximov questions him about the relations between his stepson and Nechaev, Dostoevsky, who presents Pavel throughout the book as an innocent idealist (e.g. in the story of the white suit, to which we will return), refuses to accept Nechaev as an ideological enemy: "Nechaev is not a police matter. Ultimately

Nechaev is not a matter for the authorities at all, at least for the secular authorities. […] Nechaevism is not an idea. It despises ideas, it is outside ideas. It is a spirit, and Nechaev himself is not its embodiment but its host; or rather, he is under possession by it. […] Perhaps […] in young people there is something that has not yet gone to sleep, to which the spirit of Nechaev calls" (43–44). This is the way in which Dostoevsky presents his conviction that there is something more than the rational discourse of ideas behind the animosity between what Nechaev stands for and his own position expressed, in a fittingly theological flight, as *possession*.

Moreover, although Dostoevsky tries to deny that Pavel had a first-hand relationship with this "something" (evil spirit), even he has to admit that such a relationship somehow existed ("in young people there is something […] to which the spirit of Nechaev calls"). But here comes Maximov's clever twist to Dostoevsky's story:

> Not easy to be a father, is it? I am a father myself, but luckily a father of daughters. I would not wish to be the father of sons in our age. But didn't your own father… wasn't there some unpleasantness with your father, or do I misremember? […] So I wonder, in the end, whether the Nechaev phenomenon is quite as much of an aberration of the spirit as you seem to say. Perhaps it is just the old matter of fathers and sons after all, such as we have always had, only deadlier in this particular generation, more unforgiving. (45)

Dostoevsky, of course, rejects this angle on the matter of revolution because he is not yet ready to admit to the perversity of his apophatic discourse, but the thought sticks to him and reverberates throughout the novel. What is more, it will be, of all people, Nechaev who will repeat Maximov's challenge to Dostoevsky:

> I have always had a suspicion about fathers, that their real sin, the one they never confess, is greed. They want everything for themselves. They won't hand over the moneybags, even when it's time. The moneybags are all that matter to them; they couldn't care less what happens as a consequence. I didn't believe what your stepson told me because I had heard you were a gambler and I thought gamblers didn't care about money. But there is a second side to gambling, isn't there? I should have seen that. You must be the kind who gambles because he is never satisfied, who is always greedy for more. (158)

So, indeed, there seems to be something supraideological in the animosity between Dostoevsky and Nechaev, something to do with possession, but not as understood within the limits of the theological discourse Dostoevsky uses. What is more, it is precisely the image that spontaneously comes to Dostoevsky's mind during his oratory flight while talking to Maximov, that shows the ugly stitching of the discursive costume he chooses to wear. While he is speaking about being possessed by the evil spirit "[he] makes an effort to visualise Sergei Nechaev, but all he sees is an ox's head, its eyes glassy, its tongue lolling, its skull cloven open by the butcher's axe. Around it is a seething swarm of flies. A name comes to him, and in the same instant he utters it: 'Baal' " (44). If we consider that *Ba'al* in Hebrew means "lord" or "master" (Pavel in his diary calls Dostoevsky "The Master") and that the butcher's axe is the symbol (the seal) of the group People's Vengeance, it is not difficult to see in this image the slaughtered greedy father with his dead glassy eyes and his lolling tongue, always hungry for more.[6] What is even stranger, however, is that although the father seems to be dead ("its skull cloven open"), the whole image serves to illustrate his enjoyment which seems to have survived him, leading some kind of undead existence out in the world. Who does it belong to in the final analysis?

It is typical of Dostoevsky's discourse (as the case of Ivanov shows) that it is always his antagonist whom he imagines experiencing enjoyment in a sick way, drawing perverse pleasure from shameful activities – unnatural sensuality, "extremism of the senses" is precisely Dostoevsky's charge against Nechaev. However, when he is in a less "metaphysical" mood, the truth of his cryptic accusation of "Baalism" is presented in a more understandable way – it boils down to an accusation of Jesuitism as Dostoevsky imagines it: "This place is like a Spanish convent in the days of Loyola: well-born girls flagellating themselves, rolling about in ecstasies, foaming at the lips; or fasting, praying for hours on end to be taken into the arms of the Saviour. Extremists all of them, sensualists hungering for the ecstasy of death – killing, dying, no matter which" (104–105).

Here we are touching the central nerve of Dostoevsky's problem with Nechaev: revolutionary activity is presented not really as possession by an evil spirit but as something ecstatic whose *jouissance* is disgusting to Dostoevsky, but nevertheless (or *because* of it) ever

[6] Incidentally, a similar image of Beelzebub (Lord of the Flies, a variation on Baal) becomes the icon of the island supposedly bereft of fathers in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where the bloody head is that of a wild pig.

more fascinating. Yet, by a typical turn of Dostoevsky's mind ("darkness swaddled in darkness"), it is Nechaev himself, supposedly the master sensualist, who is presented as a man who cannot enjoy. To show this, Dostoevsky engages in a bout of rather vulgar "Freudian" interpretation: "There are people to whom sensation does not come by natural means. […] That is how Sergei Nechaev struck me from the beginning – as a man who could not have a natural connection with a woman, for instance. I wondered whether that might not underlie his manifold resentments" (114). Moreover, he obsessively keeps deprecating Necheav as a lover (an assessment to be compared with Dostoevsky's own sexual feats with Anna, his landlady, to which we will return later)[7]: "An egoist and worse. A poor lover too, for sure. Without feeling, without sympathy. Immature in his feelings, stalled, like a midget. A man of the future, of the next century, with a monstrous head and monstrous appetites but nothing else" (196).

Who is this man who is at the same time the supreme *jouisseur* and one unable to enjoy? Or, how can he be both at the same time? The first thing we should note is the familiar structure of the accusation we encounter here – it is one that has always been used, for example, against the Jew.[8] The Jew cannot enjoy the world "naturally" because of his obsessive (monstrous) attachment to money, which is only the abstract equivalent of things that can be "naturally" enjoyed; but somehow this "unnatural" enjoyment comes back with a vengeance, because the Jew is at the same time one against whom our innocent women should be protected because he is always on the look-out for a chance to pollute their purity with his disgusting lust. The logic of this image is quite obvious: since the Jew always seems to be having a good time (performing his rituals, eating his food, etc. – doing things unknown or incomprehensible to us) while we cannot really say the same about ourselves, the very spectacle of it traumatises us and we find him to be the thief of the enjoyment rightfully belonging to us. And since enjoyment is "naturally" ours, the Jew, by definition, must use it in some "unnatural" (excessive) way.[9]

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[7] For example: "So was that meant to bring about the birth of the saviour? […] A real river of seed. You must have wanted to make sure. The bed is soaked" (225).

[8] And, of course, in populist anticommunist discourse the communist and the Jew become identified. The historical Dostoevsky was a noted anti-Semite.

[9] "What a Jewish performance!" thinks Dostoevsky, summing up the way he threw himself on Pavel's fresh grave (9). In a different context, the logic of "stolen" *jouissance* is analysed in Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar VII), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 167–230.

Another question is that of Dostoevsky's own "natural connection with a woman" – the only times he feels overwhelming satisfaction in his relationship with his wife are moments of voluptuous self-abasement when he falls to his knees in front of her and confesses his worthlessness.[10] So much for the way in which sensation comes by natural means. So, Dostoevsky's apophatic self-abasement before Pavel shaped in the image of Jesus ("Pavel will not be saved till he [Dostoevsky] has freed the dog and brought it into his bed, brought *the least thing*, the beggarmen and the beggarwomen too, and much else he does not yet know of") may be seen in exactly the same light – it is the discourse of the perverse *jouisseur*.

Dostoevsky knows that his attitude towards Nechaev goes beyond ideology, one sign of which is his disgust with not only what his adversary stands for but with himself personally. When Dostoevsky speaks to him or thinks of him, he is always represented as an ugly man whose physical appearance in itself is revolting ("He remembers a remark made by Princess Obolenskaya, Mroczkowski's mistress 'He may be the *enfant terrible* of anarchism, but really, he should do something about those pimples' " (101)). What he does not admit, however, is that what infuriates him most in Nechaev is the enjoyment he seemingly has (or had) access to but which, to Dostoevsky, is inaccessible and therefore sickening. And it is precisely this enjoyment that Dostoevsky wants to deny in the image of the pure and innocent Pavel – it is impossible that his stepson, supposedly a paragon of purity, could have enjoyed in the obscene Nechaevite way. But whence comes such strong reluctance to allow the possibility of enjoyment to a grown-up man of twenty-one years of age? Since the innocent image of Pavel is the ideal ego with which Dostoevsky

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[10] These moments when "her husband kneels before her and confesses he has gambled away their last rouble and beats his breast and kisses the hem of her dress" (84) are for Dostoevsky those in which he enjoys his shame: "Yet he cannot deny that a certain gaiety is creeping into his own heart, a gaiety of the spendthrift husband. Of course, they are something to be ashamed of, these reckless bouts of his. Of course, when he comes home stripped bare and confesses to his wife and bows his head and endures her reproaches and vows he will never lapse again, he is sincere. But at the bottom of his heart, beneath the sincerity, where only God can see, he knows he is right and she is wrong" (159). Even if the confession can be dispensed with, it is forced on his wife: "His indiscretions hitherto have been followed by remorse and, on the heels of remorse, a voluptuous urge to confess. These confessions, tortured in expression yet vague in point of detail, have confused and infuriated his wife, bedevilling their marriage far more than the infidelities themselves" (62).

explicitly identifies,[11] isn't the enjoyment so fervently denied because it is ultimately Dostoevsky's own?

The moment Dostoevsky for the first time leaves the Nechaevites, who have ironically tried to use his theological discourse against him (which worked to a certain extent), he, in a state of confusion, asks himself, "When you [Nechaev] say I am Judas, who is Jesus?" (107) As we have seen, the way Dostoevsky first confronts Pavel's death is by placing him in the position of a Jesus-like pure and innocent victim who is able to come and save him from his guilt. Now, however, when he has to confront the image of a *vengeful* stepson (a sympathiser or member of the People's Vengeance), which does not fit Dostoevsky's angelic fantasy, and having confronted Nechaev's revolutionary *jouissance*, which must have been also Pavel's,[12] he is momentarily shaken in his religious identifications, the defences are down for a moment, and what follows this question about Judas is a horrific scene in his mind of his stepson experiencing enjoyment (because the mind is Dostoevsky's, the scene is tinged with masochistic flavour): "He sees the Finn [one of the Nechaevites] naked, enthroned on a bed of scarlet cushions, her bulky legs apart, her arms held wide to display her breasts and a belly rotund, hairless, barely mature. And Pavel on his knees, ready to be covered and consumed" (107).[13] Confronted with Nechaev's *jouissance*, all the screening devices malfunction for a moment and we see what is behind them, what Dostoevsky really dreads. Interestingly, what we encounter here is a kind of reversal of the famous Freudian primal scene when the child witnesses or imagines his parents making love, a kind of beginning of his or her analytic story – in Dostoevsky's vision the relation seems at first glance to be reversed (instead of the child observing the parents, we have the parent spying on the child), but it is obviously not accidental that Pavel is *kneeling*, which is the position in front of women that allows Dostoevsky to experience enjoyment.

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[11] For example: "He should wear a black tie, or a black band around his arm in the Italian manner, then his standing would be clearer – to himself too. Not a full man any longer: half a man. Or on his lapel a medal with Pavel's image. The better half taken, the half that was to come" (192).

[12] "Christ in his wrath, he thinks [about Nechaev]: that is who he models himself on. The Christ of the Old Testament, the Christ who scourged the usurers out of the temple. Even the costume is right: not a dress but a robe. An imitator; a pretender; a blasphemer" (103).

[13] It could be suggested that what Dostoevsky did by marrying somebody of Pavel's generation (the wife he left in Dresden) is also a way of spying on his stepson's lovemaking (Dostoevsky taking the place of his stepson or somebody of his generation).

So who is Jesus, then? Dostoevsky answers this question himself, accusing Nechaev of behaving like Christ: "Instead of making your escape like a sensible person [Dostoevsky, of all people, as the advocate of acting sensibly!], you behave like Jesus outside Jerusalem, waiting for the arrival of an ass to carry you into the hands of your persecutors. Are you hoping I will play the part of the ass?" (187). It may be said that the image of Jesus is split for Dostoevsky between Pavel, the pure innocent victim who does not enjoy and in front of whose image candles should be burned,[14] and Nechaev, the one who brings the sword and with it enjoyment, where the latter is the truth of the former. The underpinning of the image of innocence comes to the fore all too obviously in a few instances when Pavel actually *does* appear to Dostoevsky in the novel – this takes place solely during or after his making love to Anna, Pavel's former landlady and a surrogate mother: "It is as though they are making love through a sheet, the grey, tattered sheet of his grief. At the moment of climax he plunges back into sleep as into a lake. As he sinks Pavel rises to meet him. […] This is the vision in its ugly extremity that rushes at him out of the vortex of darkness into which he is descending inside the woman's body. It bursts upon him, possesses him, speeds on" (56).

While no amount of sentimentalising fervency is able to bring Pavel back, it is enough to start behaving like Baal (The Master) who does not respect the Law (Dostoevsky has a wife in Dresden) – whose only law is his will to enjoy his (Nechaevite?) "monstrous appetites" – for the "saviour" to appear. In this regard, Dostoevsky's vision of "Nechaev in Siberia haunting the beginnings of his son" (143) is perfectly clear in meaning:

> What he has been thrusting away, what comes back insistently as he talks, is what he can only call a troll, a misshapen little creature, red-haired, red-bearded, no taller than a child of three or four. Pavel is still running and shouting in the snow, his knees knocking together coltishly. As for the troll, he stands to one side looking on. He is wearing a rust coloured jerkin open at the neck; he (or it) does not seem to feel cold. […] Who is this troll-creature? He peers more closely into the face. With a shock it comes home to him. The cratered skin, the scars swelling hard and livid in the cold, the thin beard growing out of the pock-marks – it is Nechaev again. (143)

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[14] Matryona and Dostoevsky: " 'May I light a candle for him?' 'Yes, you may' " (78).

Here we have it all: disgust expressed in ugliness and the misshapenness of the raw flesh of the figure of enjoyment ("hard and livid")[15] juxtaposed against the child's innocence set in the expanses of a purity of whiteness. But these are not really the beginnings of Dostoevsky's son, since the boy is already seven years old; these are the beginnings of Dostoevsky's image of him as a little innocent (a small colt in the purity of snow). So is the troll the Nechaevite aspect of Pavel (enjoyment) to develop in him later in life, or is it rather the image of *Dostoevsky's own obscene enjoyment of the spectacle of innocence he has created*? Because spectacles of innocence, in order to work properly, that is, to be sentimentally efficient, have to be ones of *hurt* innocence, as the nineteenth century novel (especially Dickens and Dostoevsky himself) taught us.

This is precisely Nechaev's insight into Dostoevsky and the workings of his enjoyment: " 'Don't sentimentalise me, don't pretend you are not my enemy. I know about your sentimentalising. You do it to women too, I'm sure. Women and little girls.' He turns to the girl [a young prostitute they have encountered]. 'You know all about it, don't you? How men of that type drop tears when they hurt you, to lubricate their consciences and give themselves thrills' " (193). Dostoevsky's sentimentalising about Pavel is only a screen that hides his aggression towards him, the aggression which comes to the fore every time the "real" Pavel (the one who does not fit his angelic image) is mentioned: the Pavel who did not want to give up his *jouissance* by getting up in the morning, or by abandoning his mother to Dostoevsky ("how could one love him when he was so suspicious, so unsmiling, when he clung to his mother *like a leech*, and grudged every minute she spent away from him" (151; emphasis added)), or the Pavel who thought that his new stepmother was too young for Dostoevsky. It is also transparent in the dream Dostoevsky has shortly after moving into Pavel's old room, and, tellingly, just after he performs the sentimental spectacle of throwing himself on Pavel's fresh grave before the eyes of Anna and her astonished daughter Matryona, where the imp of perverse enjoyment is with him all along ("Let her see there are no bounds!" (9), it whispers in his ear as it has always done during other demonstrations of self-abasement in front of women):

> He is swimming underwater. The light is blue and dim. He banks and glides easily, gracefully; his hat seems to have gone, but in his

[15] One cannot help but recall the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century images of misshapen onanists popular in religious educational pamphlets.

> black suit he feels like a turtle, a great old turtle in his natural element. […] He grows more and more ponderous, till his breast-bone is brushing the silt of the river-bed. Pavel is lying on his back. His eyes are closed. […] From his turtle throat he gives a last cry, which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to kiss his face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting. (17–18)

The sentimentalised innocent Pavel is supposed to come and forgive, but since the very image of innocence is the outcome of Dostoevsky's concealment of his own aggression (enjoyment!) from himself, he can appear either as an image "infected" by Nechaev (the master of "unnatural" enjoyment: "He tries to summon up Pavel's face. But the face that appears to him instead, and appears with surprising vividness, is […] the face of the young man who sat behind Bakunin on the stage at the Peace Congress two years ago" (49)), or else during the very enjoyment of making "illicit" extramarital love.[16] Hence Pavel is the one who "constitutionally" *cannot* forgive because he is an image made out of aggression whose other side is Nechaev, the very paragon of the fight to the death, of the slogan "everything is possible." What is more, it is Nechaev who really occupies the position Dostoevsky "against himself" identifies with, though he rarely has the courage to admit this (he invented the sentimentalised Pavel in order to dissimulate this identification to the world): "*He* [Nechaev] *is like me, I was like him*, he thinks – *only I did not have the courage*" (193). Therefore, in the final analysis, at least part of the disgust he feels towards Nechaev is a displaced disgust for Pavel (and, in the image of Pavel, also for Dostoevsky himself) for being a "bit of a sissy, in fact" (160), "a mascot" (100), while his professed reverence for Pavel's idealism is a displaced reverence for Nechaev, a displacement which can easily be spotted in the two characteristic scenes of Pavel as the Good Samaritan and Nechaev as the Christ impostor.

The story of the white suit that had belonged to Pavel – the only substantiation of his otherwise vague innocence and goodness[17] – is

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[16] And what makes for enjoyment is, of course, precisely its "illicitness" – with his legally wedded wife it comes not from making love but from self-abasement for wrongful deeds.

[17] One may note that Dostoevsky's confessions to his wife (the source of his perverse enjoyment) are constructed quite similarly to his relation to Pavel – they are "tortured in expression yet vague in point of detail" (62). As for Pavel, there are many "infuriating" details Dostoevsky mentions about him, while his goodness is left mostly unsubstantiated.

an insipidly didactic story,[18] which does not show any imaginative engagement on Dostoevsky's part. Its character remains a dead letter: Dostoevsky only pays lip service to the flat image he chooses to identify with. He creates a cardboard protagonist fit to sentimentalise over but totally devoid of typically Dostoevskyan "spark":

> In Tver there lived a retired officer, a captain, whose sister kept house for him. The sister's name was Maria Timofeyevna. She was a cripple. She was also weak in the head. […] A visitor from Moscow, a young man who wasn't familiar with the situation, got into conversation with Maria and began to draw her out. […] She confided to this visitor that she was betrothed, or, as she said, "promised." […] And – it now emerged – the man she was convinced was going to marry her was none other than Pavel. Where she got the idea I don't know. Maybe he gave her a smile one day, or complimented her on her bonnet – Pavel had a kind heart, that was one of the nicest things about him, wasn't it? […] You can imagine what fun Tver society had with the story of Maria and her phantom suitor. […] When Pavel heard the story, he went straight out and ordered a smart white suit. And the next thing he did was to call on the Lebyatkins, wearing his white suit and bearing flowers – roses, I believe. And though Captain Lebyatkin didn't at first take kindly to it, Pavel won him over. To Maria he behaved very considerately, very politely, like a complete gentleman, though he was not yet twenty. The visits went on all summer, till he left Tver and came back to Petersburg. It was a lesson to everyone, a lesson in chivalry. A lesson to me too. (72–74)[19]

As we noted earlier, it is precisely the creation of images of this kind that Nechaev accuses Dostoevsky of. While they talk about the prostitute's hungry children, Nechaev explains, "These innocents would fall upon you like rats and chew you up if they did not know you were strong enough to beat them off. But you prefer not to recognize that. You prefer to see three little angels on a brief visit to earth" (186). It is obvious that the image of the "three little angels" is made precisely from the same pathetic imaginative stuff Pavel's innocence is made of (although in his diary he shows only resentment towards his stepfather), while it is Nechaev who absorbs Dostoevsky's imagination to a feverish degree. Fascination and something approaching reverence for Nechaev's strength of will radiates from the image

[18] Nineteenth century Christian educational pamphlets come to mind again.

[19] This story is, of course, taken from *The Possessed* where it is far from didactic: it illustrates the *perversity* of Stavrogin – he courts Lebyatkin's "simple" sister out of boredom and as a joke, then abandons her without a word.

below (one among many instances), although it mixes glorification (admiration) with disgust (defence against such admiration):

> More and more it is becoming clear: Nechaev will not be satisfied till he is in the hands of the police, till he has tasted that too. So that his courage and his resolution can be put to test. And he will come through – no doubt of that. He will not break. No matter how he is beaten or starved, he will never give in, not even fall sick. He will lose all his teeth and smile. He will drag his broken limbs around, roaring, strong as a lion. (193)

What is more, Dostoevsky is aware that his identification with the white suit, the image of chivalry and innocence, is *obscene*: "He opens Pavel's suitcase and dons the white suit. Hitherto he has worn it as a gesture to the dead boy, a gesture of defiance and love. But now, looking in the mirror, he sees only a seedy imposture and, beyond that, something surreptitious and obscene, something that belongs behind the locked doors and curtained windows of rooms where men in wigs bare their rumps to be flogged" (71). In other words, he realises that his imaginary identification is fake, that the identification itself is perversity because it is precisely by donning the white suit (whether actually or symbolically while sentimentalising about Pavel) that Dostoevsky can obscenely enjoy *extremity*, following in the footsteps of the lion-strong Nechaev. It is his pretended identification with the (imagined?) prissiness of his weakling stepson that allows Dostoevsky to break all the chains which prevent his enjoyment ("Let her [Anna] see there are no bounds!" (9)).

The aggression directed towards Pavel is so strong that it must have deeper foundations than just the disappointment of a noted stepfather in a middling stepson and Maximov is clever enough to strike at the core of Dostoevsky's problem in a passage we have quoted earlier: "Not easy to be a father, is it? I am a father myself, but luckily a father of daughters. I would not wish to be the father of sons in our age. But didn't your own father… wasn't there some unpleasantness with your father, or do I misremember?" (45). The unpleasantness he is talking about is partly explained later by Nechaev: "I know about your father, Pavel Isaev told me – what a petty tyrant he was, how everyone hated him, till his own peasants killed him. You think that because you and your father hated each other, the history of the world has to consist of nothing but fathers and sons at war with each other" (188–89). (This is more or less an accurate image of the historical Dostoevsky's father. Moreover, we

know that, later in his life, he lived permanently drunk and created for himself a little harem from among his peasants).[20] In this way the figure of the obscene Master appears again.

Dostoevsky has to construe the image of his stepson as pure and innocent (a stranger to enjoyment) because he knows very well that in the eyes of his stepson it is he himself who had assumed the position of the hated Master, not primarily the Master Writer, but the Master of ("unnatural," "obscene") Enjoyment, because of his marriage to Anna Snitkina (the wife left in Dresden), a woman more or less of Pavel's own age, and thus a generation younger than Dostoevsky himself. Because of what he feels to be the "obscenity" of this marriage, Pavel does not want to admit that his stepparents share a bed: "Pavel was nineteen, yet obstinately would not accept that she, Anna Grigoryevna, would henceforth share his father's bed. For the year they all lived together Pavel maintained the fiction that Anya was simply his father's companion: someone to keep house, order the groceries, attend to the laundry" (108). Thus we come across a deeper source of the excessive guilt Dostoevsky feels in connection with his stepson. As we have noted, although he sentimentalises Pavel most of the time and displays the idealised image of the boy as the source of his guilt (the guilt of not loving him enough), what he really remembers about his stepson are the moments he behaved like a brat ("half a dozen times in a single night they would hear from the next room that high, insistent little voice calling to his mother to come and kill the mosquito that was biting him" (151)), so this source of guilt is only a screen that is paraded before the eyes of the world in order to hide a different source of guilt and to provide a bit of masochistic enjoyment in Dostoevsky's self-abasing kneeling before the image of his stepson.[21] What seems to be the real source of guilt has to do with Pavel but on a different level: Pavel is a kind of mirror – in his eyes Dostoevsky sees his own resemblance to his own father, the obscene father of enjoyment, the drunken tyrant, the master of his harem.[22] The father who is supposed to be dead unex-

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[20] Mackiewicz, *Dostojewski*, 18.

[21] Pavel is presented as beautiful, chaste, innocent, etc., so his image is in a conventional way *feminised*.

[22] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty" in: *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 60: "The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father-image in him that is thus miniaturized, beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? What the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father."

pectedly rears his ugly head in his son, Dostoevsky, and therefore, in order to deny his own obscenity, Dostoevsky has to invent the fantasy of a virgin son, Pavel, with whom he can identify.

But it is more than just a matter of guilt. When Nechaev confronts Dostoevsky with his image of master *jouisseur* (the image Pavel passed on to Nechaev), he confronts him with much more than just an aspect of his stepson which Dostoevsky was not aware of or did not want to be aware of – he brings before his eyes the whole set of dubious identifications that Dostoevsky's existence is based on, the questioning of which evokes a feeling close to panic.

The first thing Nechaev questions is the centrality of the father-son relation, which is crucial to Dostoevsky for reasons we shall shortly come to. In a twist thoroughly typical of Dostoevsky, when he is accused of perversity by Nechaev ("You know all about it, don't you? How men of that type drop tears when they hurt you, to lubricate their consciences and give themselves thrills" (193)), he immediately comes up with an image of *the father* as Nechaev's last chance to be saved: "Go home to your father. You have a father somewhere in Ivanovo, if I remember. Go to him, kneel, ask him to hide you. He will do it. There are no limits to what a father will do" (194). As we can see, the kneeling posture and the feeling of consuming boundlessness ("Let her see there are no bounds!"), characteristic for Dostoevsky's method of enjoyment, are already there and Nechaev reads them correctly, countering with another image, a corrective to the elevated image of fatherhood, and brings before Dostoevsky's eyes the way the father enjoys:

> My father! What do you know about my father? I'm not a ninny like your stepson! I don't cling to the people who oppress me! I left my father's house when I was sixteen and I've never been back. Do you know why? Because he beat me. I said, "Beat me once more and you will never see me again." So he beat me and he never saw me again. From that day he ceased to be my father. I am my own father now. I have made myself over. […] You say there are no limits to what a father will do. Do you know that my father shows my letters to the police? I write to my sisters and he steals the letters and copies them for the police *and they pay him*. Those are his limits. (194)

What we have here is another image of boundless obscenity of the father at the same time enjoying his own aggression (beating) and participating in the *jouissance* of Power supposedly higher than him but which he perversely uses for the purpose of his own enjoyment

(by humiliating himself before that power: betraying his son for the "higher" purposes of the State). What is more, Dostoevsky himself invokes the truth of the boundlessness of "what a father will do" in the story of one of the convicts he met in Siberia:

> He recalls a fellow-convict in Siberia, a tall, stooped, grey man who had violated his twelve-year-old daughter and then strangled her. He had been found after the event sitting by the side of a duckpond with the lifeless body in his arms. He had yielded without a struggle, insisting only on carrying the dead child home himself and laying her on a table – doing all of this with, it was reported, the greatest tenderness. In the evenings he would sit on his bunk wearing a quiet smile, his lips moving as he read the Gospels to himself. In time one might have expected the ostracism to relax, his contrition to be accepted. But in fact he continued to be shunned, not so much for a crime committed twenty years ago as for that smile, in which there was something so sly and so mad that it chilled the blood. The same smile, they said one to another, as when he did the deed: nothing in his heart has changed. […] Does that explain Nechaev's vengefulness: that his eyes have been opened to the fathers naked, the band of fathers, their appetites bared? (124–25)

In this story we encounter the ultimate image of the obscene father of *jouissance* hidden behind all the father figures in the novel (Maximov too is a *jouisseur*, getting his share of the enjoyment of his place of Power[23]) envious of the others' enjoyment and complete with what looks like Christian humility but which in fact is just another way of getting off on self-abasement before the figure of authority.

There is a telling contrast between Nechaev's "I am my own father now. I have made myself over," and Dostoevsky's "I am his [Pavel's] mother and his father, I am everything to him, and more!" (16). Nechaev symbolically kills his "lawless" father (kills his father's image in himself), the father who did not introduce the Law which would limit also his own and not only his son's enjoyment.[24]

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[23] "A father like an old rat creeping in afterwards upon the love-scene to see what is left for him. Sitting on the corpse in the dark, pricking his ears, gnawing, listening, gnawing. Is that why the police-pack hunts the free youth of Petersburg so vengefully, with Maximov, the good father, at its head?" (107).

[24] In Lacanian psychoanalysis the proper father function consists of two moments: alienation and separation. Alienation consists of the father's "No!" (prohibition), which separates the child from the mother (hence it is called symbolic castration), creating a lack in the mother; while separation is the naming (symbolising) of this lack, in other words, naming what the mother lacks, that is, what she desires. With alienation the father prohibits enjoyment, with separation he introduces the

Yet he sees no proper fathers around him, all of them are obscene *jouisseurs* preying on their own or others' children in one way or another (Nechaev, disguised as a woman to hide from the police, says: "Do you know what it is like to be a woman by yourself on the streets of Petersburg? […] Do you know what you have to listen to? Men dog your footsteps whispering filth such as you cannot imagine, and you are helpless against it! […] Or perhaps you can imagine it only too well. Perhaps what I describe is only too familiar to you" (102)). Thus, in order to "make himself over" Nechaev looks for a clear cut:

> You think that because you and your father hated each other, the history of the world has to consist of nothing but fathers and sons at war with each other. You don't understand the meaning of the revolution. Revolution is the end of everything old, including fathers and sons. It is the end of successions and dynasties. And it keeps renewing itself, if it is true revolution. With each generation the old revolution is overturned and history starts again. That is the new idea, the truly new idea. Year One. *Carte blanche*. When everything is reinvented, everything erased and reborn: law, morality, the family, everything. (189)

Surprisingly enough, for Nechaev it is Dostoevsky himself who stands behind this fantasy of permanent revolution much more than Bakunin or other revolutionaries of the time, because Dostoevsky is the creator of the character of Raskolnikov, whom Nechaev admires. Raskolnikov, who severed the connection with "everything old" by means of the blow of the axe, tests the new idea which puts an end to "law, morality, the family, everything." Raskolnikov smashes the heads not only of the old usurer but also of her innocent and, not surprisingly, "simple" sister (a soul-mate of Maria Timofieyevna), since, as we have seen, these two images have to

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Law, which consists of the rules and aims that the child should pursue in order to be loved by his parents (symbolic achievements). The important thing is that the Law, to fulfil its function, has to be obeyed by the parents as well – this allows the child to transform his enjoyment of the mother into achieving cultural goals, which the parents desire. The "obscene" father is the father who does not obey the Law – the one who threatens, but does not accept any limitations of his *jouissance*, he prohibits and punishes because he "feels like it" at a given moment, not because he himself accepts the Law. In this situation the child is not able to identify with the Law (the Name-of-the-Father) and remains stalled at the level of *jouissance* of the mother, which overwhelms him (Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 9).

go together to be effective – killing the image of obscenity means also killing the image of innocence, since the latter is always the creation of the former.

There is, however, in *Crime and Punishment* a twist that at first sight may seem at odds with the story of struggle of sons against fathers: the obscene *jouisseur* who is killed by Raskolnikov is a woman, not a man, and so ultimately represents the mother, not the father. Yet this complication may be no obstacle at all if we recall that the father we have been speaking about so far is not the representative of the proper father function in the family (the Name-of-the-Father who introduces the Law), but the primal father of the psychoanalytic myth of the genesis of culture invented by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, the father of enjoyment who did not obey any laws and who enjoyed all women, killing, castrating or exiling his sons as rivals. What is more, since in the triangle of mother-father-son it is the father (paternal function) who is the representative of the Law, erecting bounds for *jouissance* by separating the child from the mother, the assertion which tries to undo the "triangulation" and revert to undifferentiated plenitude ("I am his mother and his father, I am everything to him, and more!" (16)) must be the product of the rival agency, that is, the *maternal* superego.

As we have already noted, Dostoevsky's formula of *jouissance* is "there are no bounds," a *jouissance* which he experiences as a vortex of time and space in which the world around becomes confusion and what remains is only the feeling of falling (69). Or it may be "the vortex of darkness into which he is descending inside the woman's body" (56). But the ultimate image of what it means to enjoy is nothing other than the epileptic fit: it starts in "joy breaking like a dawn," to be exacerbated into "a wave of terror [which] overtakes him, terror without object," to culminate in complete disappearance of the subject: "There is a cry that echoes down the stairwell, so loud and so frightful that sleepers are woken by it. As for him, he hears nothing, he is gone, there is no longer time" (68). The fits, the conjunction of joy and terror, are "not visitations. Far from it: they are nothing – mouthfuls of his life sucked out of him as if by a whirlwind that leaves behind not even a memory of darkness" (69).

Thus we come to the pernicious side of *jouissance*: enjoyment becomes a cause of anxiety, because to enjoy fully would mean to disappear as a subject, to disappear completely inside the mother's body and become her instrument of enjoyment. "There are no bounds" signifies, therefore, the disappearance of the Law, recession into a state where there is nothing but enjoyment of the maternal Thing, which

is neither good nor bad because there is nothing apart from it. For this reason, the paternal "No!" is a prohibition (of enjoyment of the mother) and therefore introduces a boundary between what is allowed and what is not, which ultimately becomes a separation of good and evil. However, in order that the Law be introduced properly it has to be the Name-of-the-Father, not the prohibition of the father of enjoyment for whom there are also no bounds (his enjoyment is the law). This, of course, is the case of Dostoevsky's father: there was no "objective" split into good and evil introduced by him – since the only thing that counted was his enjoyment, what was evil yesterday, today may turn out to be good. And it is precisely this image of himself that Dostoevsky finds in the eyes of his stepson, in spite of all his apophatic flights.

What is more, the parallel with the Freudian myth of the origin of culture can be extended in our context: as the tyrannous primal father is murdered by the confederacy of brothers (his sons), the old *jouisseur* Dostoevsky *père* gets killed by a bunch of peasants who by this act undoubtedly fulfil the wishes of his son. Moreover, the killers remain unpunished because if tried by the legal system, they would have been sent to Siberia and be lost as property to the family.[25] In the psychoanalytic myth, after their aggression is spent in the act of killing and devouring the father, their love of him gets the better of the brothers, so in order to overcome their guilt they establish him in the realm of the sacred, or rather with the establishment of the father in the dimension beyond mundane existence, the realm of the sacred is invented. In other words, by creating the image of the perfect father (which is possible only when the obscene murderous father is already dead and therefore no longer an actual threat), they take upon themselves the guilt of killing him (while in fact they did only what their father had done: killing, castrating, exiling his sons – their guilt is, therefore, their *resemblance* to the father), in this way erasing from their memory his tyranny and obscenity. The brothers kill the father and thereby establish laws that the "real" father did not know or needed (what should and should not be done – what is good, what is evil), laws that the Name-of-the-Father (the dead father turned divine) guarantees. Old Dostoevsky's peasants, however, just kill – the "No!" spoken to obscene enjoyment is voiced with all its force, yet the "contents" of the Law (What is good? What is evil?) remain enigmatic.

[25] Mackiewicz, *Dostojewski*, 18.

To a certain extent, Dostoevsky does what the brothers did: he displaces his guilt as the imaginary killer of his father into acknowledging the omnipotence of the idealised image of the Father (God) which allows him at the same time to erase the excesses and depravities of his biological father. But since those who got rid of the obscenity were the "Russian People," the image of God becomes identified with a specifically Russian God as the only true God, who established His rule by conquering the obscene Baal (from now on identified, by Dostoevsky, with the depraved God of Western Europe[26]). After the act, however, this God keeps silent, as it has no discourse of its own, so its Law remains enigmatic. What is more, its Law cannot be the law of Russian monarchy[27] because the peasants are not tried and punished as they should be. So we come again to the question with which we started in relation to Pavel (What does he want?) but this time in the form: how are we to distinguish good from evil? (What is the command of the Russian God? What does He want?) This question must be answered if the lawless ("boundless") rule of the father of *jouissance* is to be broken for good, but, as we have already seen, Dostoevsky, unable to distinguish between good and evil,[28] finds himself in the position of his own father in the eyes of his stepson who sees clearly that Dostoevsky is an "unnatural" *jouisseur* not only in enjoying his too young wife, but precisely in the way he offers himself to the Russian God – what he offers to Him is not his obedience but *enjoyment*, or rather his obedience takes the form of enjoyment: the guilt of the son for killing the father is transformed not into reluctantly (joylessly) obeying his word (the Law) but into excessive self-abasement before the enigmatic image of the Stranger (Dostoevsky's voluptuous breast-beating in front of his wife is only a version of that) whose message is expressed in apophatic language, that is, language whose meaning is always unclear because deferred by contradiction ("darkness swaddled in darkness"), the language in which "there are no bounds":

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[26] There is nothing on the depravity of Western Christianity in *The Master of Petersburg*, but I think we can borrow this typical trait of the historical Dostoevsky for the purposes of our argument.

[27] In nineteenth-century Russia, the autonomy of religious from secular authority is almost non-existent – the Church, since the times of Peter I, has been completely under control of the monarchy's functionaries.

[28] "He lies down on the bed, his arms tight across his chest, breathing fast, trying to expel the demon that is taking him over. He knows he resembles nothing so much as a corpse laid out, and what he calls a demon may be nothing but his own soul flailing his wings" (16).

> *Because* it is not his son he must not go back to bed but must get dressed and answer the call. If he expects his son to come as a thief in the night, and listens only for the call of the thief, he will never see him. If he expects his son to speak in the voice of the unexpected, he will never hear him. As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect. (80)

Since Dostoevsky does not know the Law (What is good? What is evil?), the only thing he can offer to this enigmatic divinity is his enjoyment. However, as we have already noted, the injunction to enjoy is the Mother's injunction and it is to her that the enjoyment is offered.[29] In other words, it is the Mother (Mother Russia!) whose wholeness is protected by such an offering and it is the Mother who demands it ("I am not here in Russia in this time of ours to live a life free of pain. I am required to live – what shall I call it? – a Russian life: a life inside Russia, or with Russia inside me, and whatever Russia means. It is not a fate I can evade" (221)).[30] Since

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[29] "The pervert constitutes himself as what is lacking in the mOther. […] He becomes what she is missing […] and what she wants. […] The Other's desire/lack is […] anxiety producing, insofar as it is not named; the pervert's solution to this anxiety is to become the object that can stop up the desire by providing the Other with *jouissance*" (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 176); "Freud reveals to us that it is thanks to the Name-of-the-Father that man does not remain bound [*attaché*] to the sexual service of his mother" (Lacan, *Écrits*, 723).

[30] Slavoj Žižek, "Woman is One of the Names-of-the-Father, or How Not To Misread Lacan's Formulas of Sexuation," *Lacanian Ink*, No. 10 (1995): 6 Aug. 2006 <http://www.lacan.com/zizwoman.htm>: "The usual way of misreading Lacan's formulas of sexuation is to reduce the difference of the masculine and the feminine side to the two formulas that define the masculine position, as if masculine is the universal phallic function and feminine the exception, the excess, the surplus that eludes the grasp of the phallic function. Such a reading completely misses Lacan's point, which is that this very position of the Woman as exception – say, in the guise of the Lady in courtly love – is a masculine fantasy par excellence. As the exemplary case of the exception constitutive of the phallic function, one usually mentions the fantasmatic, obscene figure of the primordial father-*jouisseur* who was not encumbered by any prohibition and was as such able fully to enjoy all women. Does, however, the figure of the Lady in courtly love not fully fit these determinations of the primordial father? Is she not also a capricious Master who wants it all, that is, who, herself not bound by any Law, charges her knight-servant with arbitrary and outrageous ordeals? […] In this precise sense, Woman is one of the names-of-the-father. The crucial details not to be missed here are the use of plural and the lack of capital letters: not Name-of-the-Father, but one of the names-of-the-father – one of the nominations of the excess called primordial father. In the case of Woman – the mythical She, the Queen from Rider Haggard's novel of the same

language is the outcome of the paternal "No!," the Mother's demand is the demand for *jouissance*, which is pre-symbolic and cannot be expressed in language.[31] The enjoyment is therefore offered to the Mother (Mother Russia) whose representative becomes the immaculately conceived (no enjoyment involved) son, Jesus/Pavel. Because the Mother's demand is pre-symbolic, it is necessarily enigmatic (therefore expressed in apophatic discourse, which cannot be properly understood: what does it mean to save a dead child?). However, that this demand is addressed to Dostoevsky he has never any doubt, even if others – Nechaev, Maximov, Anna – try to persuade him it may not be so. Not knowing what to offer Pavel (not knowing what he wanted, not knowing what was good and what was evil for him), he offers himself instead, providing self-laceration (a form of enjoyment) before Pavel's idealised image. And, at the end of all the substitutions described above, Dostoevsky lands in the position of the lawful father, one that is dead, that is, free of enjoyment ("I am the one who is dead, he [Dostoevsky] thinks" (19)),[32] because his relationship to Pavel is also one of "immaculate conception"; he claims to be his father emotionally (to love him dearly as a son), but he is not his father "sexually" (the son came to life without sexual enjoyment on Dostoevsky's part), so his *jouissance* (self-laceration) can be presented as precisely the loss thereof (mourning).[33]

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name for example – as well as in the case of the primordial father, we are dealing with an agency of power which is pre-symbolic, unbridled by the Law of castration; in both cases, the role of this fantasmatic agency is to fill out the vicious cycle of the symbolic order, the void of its origins: what the notion of Woman (or of the primordial father) provides is the mythical starting point of unbridled fullness whose 'primordial repression' constitutes the symbolic order."

[31] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 176. It cannot be expressed in language, in the sense that it cannot be symbolised in it, but as we have noted it appears in language as enjoyment of apophatic discourse, which produces no proper meaning (*jouissance* of language similar to the acute enjoyment children derive from nonsensical nursery rhymes, etc.). This is why Dostoevsky's discourse is "confession without end" (222) – there is no message in it, just enjoyment.

[32] "How, indeed, could Freud fail to recognise such an affinity, when the necessity of his reflection led him to tie the appearance of the signifier of the Father, as author of the Law, to death – indeed to the killing of the father – thus showing that, if this murder is the fertile moment of the debt by which the subject binds himself for life to the Law, the symbolic Father, insofar as he signifies this Law, is truly the dead Father" (Lacan, *Écrits*, 464).

[33] "Sentence had been pronounced; and the letter of sentence, addressed to me, was on its way, passing from hand to hand, only I did not know it. *The joy of your life is over*: that is what the sentence said" (9).

Even on the "political" plane, the only answer Dostoevsky can provide to the problem of the poor is offering oneself to the Other's enjoyment. When Nechaev evokes for Dostoevsky the image of the revolution (the announcement of the new Law, Day One: "The first work will be to raze the banks to the ground, and the stock exchanges, and the government ministries, raze them so thoroughly that they will never be rebuilt" (182)), Dostoevsky provides him with another way of "solving" the problem:

> This little girl […] If you were to give her a good wash and cut her hair and put a new dress on her, I could direct you to an establishment where tonight, this very night, she could earn you a hundred roubles on your five-rouble investment. And if you feed her properly and kept her clean and didn't overuse her or allow her to get sick, she could go on earning you five roubles a night for another five years at least […] There are enough children in the cellars of Petersburg, and enough gentlemen on the streets with money in their pockets and a taste for young flesh, to bring prosperity to all the poor folk of the city. All that is required is a cool head. (182–83)

One could say that Dostoevsky is trying to reduce *ad absurdum* what he perceives as Nechaev's Jesuitism ("Everything is permitted for the sake of the future" (200)), were it not for his own "taste for young flesh." Of course, Dostoevsky may be too refined (or twisted) to enjoy the physical violation of children, but he has other ways of making them serve his enjoyment. We have already mentioned the ways he gets off on his fantasy of Pavel and his memory, but the story does not end here. As the image of Pavel fades out in his mind and is gradually overshadowed by Nechaev's, it is Matryona, Anna Kolenkina's daughter, who assumes the central focus of his attention, because it appears to Dostoevsky that "somewhere in her he [Pavel] still lives, breathing the warm, sweet breath of youth" (14).[34] Although Dostoevsky ends up in bed with Anna, her mother, this can be conceived as a roundabout way to get to Matryona, as is clear from an imaginary scenario in Dostoevsky's head[35]:

> If he were more confident of his French he would channel this disturbing excitement into a book of the kind one cannot publish in Russia […]. A book that she, Anna Sergeyevna, its true beget-

[34] In the moments when Dostoevsky stops his sentimentalising, we find that the children's attitude towards Dostoevsky is the same: "[Pavel] did not take to me" (143) and "Matryona does not like me" (167).

[35] It is also something Anna finally accuses him of: "It's the truth, clear for anyone to see! You use me as a route to her, and I cannot bear it!" (231).

> ter, would never see. With a chapter in which the noble memoirist reads aloud to the young daughter of his mistress a story of the seduction of a young girl in which he himself emerges more and more clearly as having been the seducer. A story full of intimate detail and innuendo which by no means seduces the daughter but on the contrary frightens her and disturbs her sleep and makes her so doubtful of her own purity that three days later she gives herself up to him in despair, in the most shameful of ways, in a way of which no child could conceive were the story of her own seduction and surrender and the manner of its doing not deeply impressed on her beforehand. (134)

Dostoevsky's own version of frightening and disturbing sleep is less "frenchified" (not an erotic story) and much more bluntly Russian. In the middle of relating to Matryona the story of Pavel's white suit (a schoolbook sentimental tale which no doubt would be approved as suitable for young girls), he strikes:

> "Perhaps, in her simplicity, she thought that is what the world is: a place where you get beaten. […] That is how a dog must see the world, after all, or a horse. Why should Maria [Timofeyevna Lebyatkin] be different? A horse does not understand that it has been born into the world to pull carts. It thinks it is here to be beaten. It thinks of a cart as a huge object it is tied to so that it cannot run away while it is being beaten." […] He knows: she rejects with all her soul the vision of the world he is offering. She wants to believe in goodness. But her belief is tentative, without resilience. He feels no mercy toward her. *This is Russia!* he wants to say, forcing the words upon her, rubbing her face in them. In Russia you cannot afford to be a delicate flower. In Russia you must be a burdock or a dandelion. (72–73)

Then he adds to it the tale of the indifferent God ("It is more likely that Pavel put himself at risk, to see whether God loved him enough to save him. He asked God a question – Will you save me? – and God gave him an answer. God said: No. God said: Die" (75)) and even provides an illustration of what such a God may look like, giving his own lascivious smile to him ("an ugly, crooked, bearded smile" (75)), the smile of the God through whose mask of indifference obscenity is breaking through. In other words, in the way Dostoevsky relates the imaginary death of Pavel, he provides Matryona with the story of a God who actually enjoys the death of the son.[36] So, rather

[36] "He said to God: If you love me, save me. But there was only silence. Then he said: I know you are there, I know you hear me. I will wager my life that you will

than with the image of Jesus (Pavel?) whose message is clear ("Love your neighbour"),[37] Matryona is presented with the trauma of the God whose truth is the horrific demand of Abraham: "Kill me your son."[38] Having thus hurt Matryona, Dostoevsky has her sobbing in his arms ("she gives herself up to him in despair") in a way understanding that her life too is in danger ("I don't understand […] why did he have to die?" (76) – it is also a question about herself, her mortality, and the cruelty of God) and Dostoevsky can unashamedly enjoy her suffering. Obscene images ride through his mind:

> He thinks of a little terracotta statue he saw in the ethnographic museum in Berlin: the Indian god Shiva lying on his back, blue and dead, and riding on him the figure of a terrible goddess, many-armed, wide-mouthed, staring-eyed, ecstatic – riding him, drawing the divine seed out of him. […] He has no difficulty in imagining this child in her ecstasy. His imagination seems to have *no bounds*. (76; emphasis added)

Moreover, it is a moment of clarity for him, as he is perfectly aware of what he is doing:

> This is as far as violation goes: the girl in the crook of his arm, the five fingers of his hand, white and dumb, gripping her shoulder. But she might as well be sprawled naked. One of those girls who give themselves because their natural motion is to be good, to submit. He thinks of child-prostitutes he has known, here and in Germany; he thinks of men who search out such girls because beneath the garish paint and provocative clothes they detect something that outrages them, a certain inviolability, a certain maidenliness. *She is prostituting the Virgin*, such a man says, recognizing the flavour of innocence in the gesture with which the girl cups her breasts for him, in the movement with which she spreads her thighs. In the tiny room with its stale odours, she gives off a faint, desperate smell of spring, of flowers, that he cannot bear. Deliberately, with teeth clenched, he hurts her again and again, beyond mere wincing, mere bearing of pain: for the sudden wide-eyed look of a creature that begins to understand its life is in danger. (76–77)

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save me. And still God said nothing. Then he said: However much you stay silent, I know you hear me. I am going to make my wager – now! And he threw down his wager. And God did not appear. God did not intervene" (75).

[37] Pavel's death, as told by Dostoevsky, can be read as the story of Jesus's death – the Jesus of atheists who shouts "Why have you forsaken me?" – dies, and is not resurrected.

[38] The demand which is as enigmatic and incomprehensible as the demand of Mother Russia already mentioned.

So Dostoevsky's story of prostituting the Virgin which he tells to Nechaev is not just a perverse but ultimately harmless story ("This is all out of one of your books! It is all part of your perverse make-believe!" is Nechaev's reaction (184)), but a scenario which constitutes the backbone of Dostoevsky's convoluted relationship with his *jouissance*, the core of his existence.

It also adds to the understanding of possession that Dostoevsky so often evokes. There is a moment in which Dostoevsky's *jouissance* materialises in front of his eyes in a hallucinatory way: while talking to Matryona about Nechaev, warning her about him (being jealous that he has stolen Matryona from him: now instead of listening to his obscene stories about God, she embraces Nechaev's fantasy of the revolution), his enjoyment jumps at him with all its force in the image of the "possessed" Matryona: "Her lips part, the corners of her mouth quiver. She is going to cry, he thinks. But it is not like that at all. When she raises her eyes, he is enveloped in a glance that is at once shameless and derisive. She draws away from his hand, tossing her hair. 'No!' he says. The smile she wears is taunting, provocative. Then the spell passes and she is a child as before, confused, ashamed" (213).

Dostoevsky rightly recognises the source of what happened – it is as if he were present to himself during his fit, that is, in the moment when his *jouissance* breaks out and wipes out his self:

> It is impossible that what he has just seen has truly taken place. What he has seen comes not from the world he knows but from another existence. It is as though for the first time he has been present and conscious during a seizure; so that for the first time his eyes have been open to where he is when he is seized. In fact, he must wonder whether *seizure* is any longer the right word, whether the word has not all along been *possession* – whether everything that for the past twenty years has gone under the name of seizure has not been a mere presentiment of what is now happening, the quaking and dancing of the body a long-drawn-out prelude to a quaking of the soul. (213)

Although it is Nechaev who Dostoevsky calls possessed, the truth of what he calls possession turns out to have its source in his own *jouissance*, which he cannot bear any longer[39] and which, when it disfigures the image of Matryona, frightens him.

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[39] It is a Lacanian commonplace that the human body is not made to the measure of *jouissance*.

Dostoevsky knows the price of *jouissance*: it is the loss of reality, the state of falling without up and down, the loss of the self experienced in the epileptic fit; therefore, as he himself voices it, he needs somebody to save him. In other words, he needs somebody who would put a stop to *jouissance*, somebody who would announce the Law (prohibit *jouissance*), somebody who would introduce coordinates creating up and down, draw the boundary between good and evil. At first he thinks of Pavel as such a person, the fantastic vision of an innocent Pavel created in the image of Christ, who, kissing Dostoevsky on the lips ("I want to have him back […]. I want to kiss him on the lips" (140)), would inaugurate a new era, open the new dispensation, announce the new Law. But, as we have already noted, Dostoevsky's image of Pavel is just a screen behind which his own *jouissance* is hidden, which even Dostoevsky belatedly recognises – now the Christ imagery of resurrection becomes a source of fear of the son who has risen *against* his father: "He knows now why he has not gone back to Yelagin Island [where Pavel is buried]. It is because he fears to see the soil tossed aside, the grave yawning, the body gone. A corpse improperly buried; burried now within him, in his breast, no longer weeping but hissing madness, whispering to him to fall. […] He is sick and he knows the name of his sickness. Nechaev, voice of the age, calls it vengefulness, but a truer name, less grand, would be resentment" (234).

But even before fully admitting to such resentment, he must have known about it somehow, since this is precisely why he "prostitutes" Pavel's image (innocence) in Matryona. Why does he do it, however, knowing that it is precisely what causes his "falling"? It is done because he wants to provoke the Other into announcing the Law, into introducing a prohibition. Yet the Other is reluctant to do this, s/he has to be frightened into it, *jouissance* offered must reach the level s/he cannot bear any more.[40] So the moment comes when it is all too much to Anna and she says her "No!" when Dostoevsky announces that he would like to have a child with her ("No! This is my decision" (224)).

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[40] Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 187: " 'The masochist tries to bring something into being… by which the Other's desire makes the law" ([Lacan] Seminar X, January 16, 1963), and the Other must often first be made extremely anxious before he agrees to enunciate the law. Though the masochist seems to be single-mindedly devoting himself to "pleasuring" the Other, the Other cannot take it after a certain point: *jouissance* becomes unbearable, and the partner finally imposes limits on it. By making the Other anxious (by making himself into the instrument of the Other's *jouissance*), the masochist manages to get himself commanded (*se faire commander*, a formulation of the masochist's drive)."

Moreover, simultaneously the true sense of possession comes to the fore again: "It is the word he himself uses, though he cannot believe in the same sense as she. *The devil*: [Anna uses it] the instant at the onset of the climax. When the soul is twisted out of the body and begins its downward spiral into oblivion. And, flinging her head from side to side, clenching her jaw, grunting, it is not hard to see her too as possessed by the devil" (230–31). Again, it is Dostoevsky who is the devil provoking others and frightening them at the same time, his excessive *jouissance* painting the ugly obscene smile on the surface of reality as was the case with his vision of the possessed Matryona. Her mother, however, cannot bear it anymore – Dostoevsky's enjoyment frightens her too much, so she breaks down and tells him to leave Petersburg (231–32). Thus Dostoevsky succeeds in provoking a breakdown, yet his success is only temporary – it does not produce the announcement of the law: Anna pronounces her "No!" but a few hours later she recants and returns to bed again for more ("Don't pay attention to what I said. […] There are times when I am not myself [possessed?], you must get used to that" (232)), wiping herself and him out in a sexual trance ("At first her intensity carries itself over to him. There is a long passage in which he again loses all sense of who he is, who she is. About them is an incandescent sphere of pleasure; inside the sphere they float like twins gyrating slowly" (230)).

What is more, Dostoevsky's plan of "prostituting the Virgin" (and Pavel's image in her) by confronting her with enjoyment in the most blatant image of sex and seduction (as planned for the "French" novel) is finally realised now, when the child finds them naked after the night of "possession": "This is how he and she are when Matryona finds them in the morning: her mother, wild-haired, fast asleep in the crook of his arm, snoring lightly; and he in the act of opening his eyes on the grave child at the door. […] She sees all, she knows all" (232–33). The moment Anna refrains from pursuing the path of castration ("Don't pay attention to what I said" instead of "No!"), it is inevitable that the whole situation will be turned by Dostoevsky to his advantage, that is, as another way of increasing his enjoyment by using the mother as a route to the child.

The outcome of this exacerbation of jouissance cannot be anything else than falling, but this time not a falling into an epileptic fit – it is becoming clear that all the histrionics about being saved by Pavel or God were just a smokescreen behind which another possession takes place: "There is a choice before him. He can cry out in the midst of this shameful fall, beat his arms like wings, call

upon God or his wife to save him [Dostoevsky's usual method of self-abasement]. Or he can give himself to it, refuse the chloroform of terror or unconsciousness, watch and listen instead for the moment which may or may not arrive – it is not in his power to force it – when from being a body plunging into darkness he shall become a body within whose core a plunge into darkness is taking place, a body which contains its own falling and its own darkness" (234). Thus, the image of darkness swaddled in darkness reappears again but this time the darkness in Dostoevsky is far from sublimity of apophatic discourse: "The madness is in him and he is in the madness; they think each other; what they call each other, whether madness or epilepsy or vengeance or the spirit of the age, is of no consequence" (235). Moreover, the apophatic figure of the stranger in the night also returns in a new guise. Although Dostoevsky cannot completely dispense with the familiar discourse he has been using freely throughout the novel[41] for reasons we have already analysed, the stranger in the night – the one who was supposed to be Pavel coming to save him at the beginning of his stay in Petersburg – begins to materialise before Dostoevsky's eyes without his fully realising or wanting it (as it is only fitting: "the thief will not come till the householder has forgotten him and fallen asleep").

The moment he unpacks his writing-case (it is "no longer a matter of listening for the lost child calling from the dark stream, no longer a matter of being faithful to Pavel when all have given him up" (235)), the stranger starts to take corporeal form:

> In the mirror on the dressing table he catches a quick glimpse of himself hunched over the table. In the grey light, without his glasses, he could mistake *himself* for a stranger; the dark beard could be a veil or a curtain of bees. […] He moves the chair so as to face the mirror. But the sense of someone in the room besides himself *per-*

[41] "He has not forgotten the thief in the night. If he is to be saved, it will be by the thief in the night, for whom he must unwaveringly be on watch. Yet the thief will not come till the householder has forgotten him and fallen asleep. The householder may not watch and wake without cease, otherwise the parable will not be fulfilled. The householder must sleep; and if he must sleep, how can God condemn his sleeping? God must save him, God has no other way. Yet to trap God thus in a net of reason is a provocation and a blasphemy" (236). Or again: "To Pavel it is given to speak once only. Nonetheless, he cannot accept that he will not be forgiven for having been deaf or asleep or stupid when the world was spoken. What he listens for, therefore, is Pavel's second word. He believes absolutely that he does not deserve a second word, that there will be no second word. But he believes absolutely that a second word will come" (239).

> *sists*: if not a full person then of a stick-figure, a scarecrow draped in an old suit, with a stuffed sugar-sack for a head and a kerchief across the mouth. […] He is distracted, and irritated with himself for being distracted. The very spirit of irritation keeps the scarecrow perversely alive. (236; emphases added)

Who is this exasperating presence Dostoevsky at first does not want to acknowledge? As the title of the last chapter of Coetzee's book and two fragments Dostoevsky writes down in it bear witness to, he is Stavrogin, one of the main protagonists of *The Possessed* – supposedly a fictional character taking shape in Dostoevsky's head. But to say this is not enough, because the figure is something much more and Dostoevsky senses it, asking himself questions: "Is it Ivanov? […] Or is it Pavel? […] Is this how Russia manifests itself […]? Or is the name that is dark to him the name of the other boy, the one he repudiates: Nechaev?" (237–38) He concludes that it is none of them, but we may note that all are figures with which Dostoevsky identified to a greater or lesser extent.

The presence of the figure is suffocating: "Confronting it is like descending into the waters of the Nile and coming face to face with something huge and cold and grey that may once have been born of woman but with the passing of the ages has retreated into stone, that does not belong in his world, that will baffle and overwhelm all his powers of conception" (240). And indeed it does not belong in Dostoevsky's world, at least in the world he likes to evoke with the sublimity of his religious discourse.[42] But his resistance is to no avail – the moment he puts his pen to the paper, the real nature of this disturbing presence springs up from the page:

> Thus at last the time arrives and the hand that holds the pen begins to move. But the words it forms are not the words of salvation. Instead they tell of flies, or of a single black fly, buzzing against a closed windowpane. High summer in Petersburg, hot and clammy; from the street below, noise, music. In the room a child with brown eyes and straight fair hair lying naked beside a man, her slim feet barely reaching to his ankles, her face pressed against the curve of his shoulder, where she snuggles and roots like a baby. (241)

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[42] There is a split in the historical Dostoevsky's writing that may be pertinent here – as his readers know, his "official" views as expressed in his journalism (mostly Orthodox and Panslavic imperial propaganda) are dreadful stuff, while his "real" literature, of which Stavrogin is one of the more memorable creations, presents his ideas in much more ambiguous terms.

This scene, of course, takes us to the famous deleted, or rather "censored,"[43] chapter from *The Possessed* in which Stavrogin confesses to child violation, but at the same time to the aforementioned violation of Matryona in *The Master of Petersburg*. In other words, the oppressive presence of the unspeakable Thing (huge, cold, grey, chilling) Dostoevsky tries to give shape to is the very substance of enjoyment which Dostoevsky is painfully fathering into writing. Yet it is nothing but such enjoyment that makes him a writer and it feels as if somebody else were writing him. Who is fathering whom then? It is the question that cannot be answered because it is undecidable – what makes him write is enjoyment (madness, darkness, the Nile substance) but at the same time it is the only thing he can write about: "This presence, so grey and without feature – is this what he must father, give blood to, flesh, life? Or does he misunderstand, and has he misunderstood from the beginning? Is he required, rather, to put aside all that he himself is, all he has become, down to his very features, and become as a babe again? Is the thing before him the one that does the fathering, and must he give himself to being fathered by it?" (240–41)

Hence he speaks about his writing as betrayal, as "perversions of the truth": "I write perversions of the truth. I choose the crooked road and take children into dark places. I follow the dance of the pen" (236).[44] The story had started with the white suit Dostoevsky found in Pavel's empty room and his attempt to bring him back ("You are an artist, a master […]. It is for you, not for me, to bring him back to life," says Anna (140)), but the plan did not go as it was supposed to, because the presence which filled the suit turned out to have the ox-face of Baal ("Is there a way, starting from the feet, of building up the body within the suit till at last the face is revealed, even if it is the ox-face of Baal?" (238)). The split head of Baal appears as the head of the father of enjoyment; it is the obscene image of the Master himself, who throughout the book is "perverted" into – wears the mask of – the image of innocence that Dostoevsky wants to present to the world. Yet, as soon as he gets down to writing, the perversion takes a different shape. Although Stavrogin is born as the mocking presence of Dostoevsky's (and his father's) *jouissance*

[43] Katkov, the editor of the journal in which Dostoevsky serialised his novel, had refused to publish the part which we today know as "Stavrogin's Confession," because of its "offensive" subject matter, so Dostoevsky had to rewrite the book so that it made sense without this key episode.

[44] If it were not so clichéd, one would remark on the appropriateness of the pen/penis parallel in our context.

("Intermittently the stick-figure returns, the crumpled, *old-man travesty of himself* [Dostoevsky]" (237; emphasis added)), the more "flesh" it puts on, the younger it becomes, finally reaching the form of the "body […] as perfectly formed as a god's" (241).

This is precisely the place where the *jouissance* of writing starts ("In the act of writing he experiences, today, an exceptional sensual pleasure" (245)). The Stavrogin figure "gives off […] marmoreal coldness" (241) but its presence (it is the figure of enjoyment) is precisely what causes the fall: "[Dostoevsky] is not himself any longer, not a man in the forty-ninth year of his life. Instead he is young again, with all the arrogant strength of youth. He is wearing a white suit, perfectly tailored. […] In the blood of this young man, this version of Pavel, is a sense of triumph. He has passed through the gates of death and returned: nothing can touch him any more. He is not a god but he is no longer human either. He is, in some sense, beyond the human, beyond man. There is nothing he is not capable of" (242).

Thus, what we have here is yet another image of possession (madness, fall, etc.), possession of the father who not only refuses to let go of his *jouissance*, but who is also envious of his children's enjoyment and wants to take it over because he conceives of all enjoyment that is not his as having been stolen from him. Those who enjoy in ways inaccessible to Dostoevsky (Nechaev, Pavel, Matryona) are accused by him of being possessed by the evil spirit (Baal), but their "possession" is precisely the reflection of his own obscenity which he glimpses in their faces – their suppossed shamelessness and obscenity are Dostoevsky's own. While he cannot steal the other's *jouissance* in "real" life, writing is precisely the realm where this can be done. When Dostoevsky speaks to Maximov about reading as "demon possession" (Maximov's words (47)), he only projects his own experiences as a writer into the reader, which is clear from his description: "What is it that frightens you Councillor Maximov? When you read about Karamzin or Karamzov or whatever his name is, when Karamzin's skull is cracked open like an egg, what is the truth: do you suffer with him, or do you secretly exult behind the arm that swings the axe? You don't answer? Let me tell you then: reading is being the arm and being the axe *and* being the skull; reading is giving yourself up, not holding yourself at a distance and jeering" (47). This heady possibility of having it all, the chance to have your cake and eat it, to be the father and the son simultaneously, is precisely the voluptuosity of writing that Dostoevsky conceives of in terms of the Satanic temptation of Christ: "He sits with the pen in his hand, holding himself back from a descent into representations that have

no place in the world, on the point of toppling, enclosed within a moment in which *all creation lies open at his feet*, the moment before he loosens his grip and begins to fall" (241; emphasis added). Writing appears here as the way "to turn the falling into a flying" (235), to be present at one's own epileptic fit, to be able to plunge into the substance of madness/enjoyment but at the same time remain conscious in order to enjoy it. This is the true meaning of possession: not only to be able to enjoy, but to be able to witness one's enjoyment.[45] In other words, what we come across here is the fantasy of being present at one's origin. Since the way in which one enjoys constitutes the hard kernel of who one really is, for Dostoevsky writing presents itself as the way to experience himself to the full.

What is more, if we look more attentively at the figure Dostoevsky creates, it does not appear to be a beautified and strengthened image of Pavel, in spite of what Dostoevsky says ("Not Nechaev – he knows that now. Greater than Nechaev. Not Pavel either. Perhaps Pavel as he might have been one day, grown wholly beyond boyhood to become the kind of cold-faced, handsome man whom no love can touch" (240)). Notwithstanding all denials, the image *is* an image of Nechaev since it has all the features of him that Dostoevsky is at the same time fascinated and repelled by: a young man strong as a lion, with a sense of triumph, one who has passed through the gates of death,[46] who died as a private person and returned as a man in whom death has already asserted its rights.[47] The image is obviously beautified ("greater than Nechaev"), but it is definitely not Pavel's, because, firstly, Pavel, as Dostoevsky admits, lacked Stavrogin's features of character even in budding form (he was "a sissy") and, secondly, the process of beautification has already been accomplished on Pavel by Dostoevsky and the result was the sentimentalised figure the latter presented to the world.

If we accept the foregoing, Dostoevsky's final duel with God can be seen in an unexpected light. Dostoevsky's last "act" in the book is the creation of a new version of the story of the white suit, the one

[45] Because one always enjoys as the other, one is never conscious of one's enjoyment (the epileptic fit is an extreme example of this) – one is not present to oneself while enjoying.

[46] "The revolutionary is a doomed man […]. He has no interests, no feelings, no attachments, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed in a single and total passion: revolution. In the depths of his being he has cut all links with the civil order, with law and morality. He continues to exist in society only in order to destroy it. […] He does not expect the least mercy. Every day he is ready to die" (60–61).

[47] Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 320.

we know from *The Possessed*. "Rewritten," it ceases to be an educational story of how to be chivalrous and becomes a story of perverse enjoyment. The substance of the story remains exactly the same, what is changed is the motivation: Pavel was supposed to court Maria Labyatkin to teach the town a lesson in subtle feelings, while Stavrogin courts her just for a joke, because "summer in the country is so boring" (249). This "perversion of the truth" is commented upon in this way: "It is an assault upon the innocence of a child. It is an act for which he can expect no forgiveness. With it he has crossed the threshold. Now God must speak, now God dare no longer remain silent. To corrupt a child is to force God. The device he has made arches and springs shut like a trap, a trap to catch God" (249).

Returning to our earlier proposition – that Dostoevsky provokes Anna to put a stop to his *jouissance*, which is not finally achieved (the "No!" is pronounced but the Law is not announced) – we can speculate that the "rewritten" story of the white suit is supposed to accomplish the same with respect to God, to "frighten" him into announcing the Law. In our context, "*an* assault on the innocence of *a* child" (emphases added) may have two meanings. Either the innocence that is corrupted is Pavel's (in real life he was innocent and chivalrous, while the version of him in *The Possessed*, Stavrogin, is corrupt) or it is Matryona's, since after writing the draft of the "rewritten" story Dostoevsky leaves it open on the table for Matryona to read (since she knows the "chivalrous" version, the reading of the perverse one will corrupt her faith in Pavel and in innocence – with this her own innocence will be lost). These two meanings are obviously non-exclusive, since both of them can be meant at the same time.

However, what one should note is that both of these "corruptions" or challenges to God have taken place in the book long before they appear in the final pages. Pavel's image, "no longer weeping but hissing madness" (235), that is, resentment or denial,[48] is something against which Dostoevsky bumps his head throughout the book, and he admits to Pavel's vengefulness long before the final act of the book ("Let us not be sentimental – in ordinary life he was as vengeful as any other young man" (113)). Thus, if Pavel's chivalrous image is something of Dostoevsky's own creation, its corruption is a challenge to a different kind of Master, to the one who brought this image to life, that is, to Dostoevsky himself. Since it is the image

[48] "From me nothing has come but negation," claims Stavrogin accordingly in *The Possessed* (8 March 2007: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8devl10h.htm #1_4_8>).

with which he identifies, the perversion of it is only fitting since it constitutes the reflection of Dostoevsky's own perversion (the father stealing enjoyment from the son). What we witness here is not even perversion of the truth (innocence) but the hidden truth itself that comes to light; therefore the only one who may be "forced" to become angry is the Master himself and with him God, but only as the image of the divine name the Master created to deny Dostoevsky's resemblance to his obscene father.

As for the corruption of Matryona's innocence, it was already attempted in the scene of intellectual violation analysed above ("the world is […] a place where you get beaten," etc. (72–77)). What is more, the scenario Dostoevsky pursues in the last act is a repetition of the challenge Dostoevsky – while "violating" Matryona – assigns to Pavel. (Dostoevsky has already spoken to Maximov, so he knows that the suicide story is likely to be a police fabrication. Maximov himself suggests Pavel was killed by the Nechaevites.) In his story, Pavel – who has featured so far as an innocent child – challenges God with his suicide ("He asked God a question – will you save me? – and God gave him an answer. God said: No. God said: Die" (75)). What we have to note is that, firstly, innocence and this type of challenge are very much at odds with each other and, secondly, that God's silence, which at first constitutes the predicament ("There was only silence" (75)) is finally taken for an answer. God stays silent anyway, so objectively nothing changes, yet the act is supposed to force God to speak "No" – finally it is the same silence of God which is taken as a proof of his existence (a typical example of Dostoevsky's "darkness swaddled in darkness").

Let us now return to the image of Stavrogin. We have already noted that it, in fact, resembles Nechaev (the one who really enjoys, according to Dostoevsky) much more than Pavel (only a shadow of Nechaev's strength). Therefore, what if the perversion is not of Pavel's (false, imaginary) innocence, but of Nechaev's? Not innocence in a fake "chivalric" form as preached by Dostoevsky (who cannot hide even from himself that it is his own invention) but the innocence of the *faithful* son that Necheav, in a sense, is: " 'I have read your book *Crime and Punishment* […]. It is an excellent book. I have never read anything like it. […] You must have heard it praised by many people. Still, I am telling you –' He clasps a hand to his breast, then, as though tearing out his heart, flings the hand forward" (177). Dostoevsky's reading of this gesture is unexpected – it is here where genuine innocence is met: "A virgin heart, he thinks, bewildering itself in its stirrings" (177). While Pavel Isaev resented Dostoevsky,

Nechaev chooses Dostoevsky to be his spiritual father as the creator of Raskolnikov, a "sympathetic" character beyond good and evil, one with whom readers can identify.[49] Now, Dostoevsky, in order to deny this bond, has to create another character beyond good and evil, but this time a *repellent* one, who takes his own life as a result of sheer self-disgust.[50] Yet the subduing of admiration for Nechaev does not go so easily: although Stavrogin is repellent, shreds of admiration for him appear throughout *The Possessed*. And such subduing is even harder because, as we have seen, Stavrogin is at the same time the image of Dostoevsky's own enjoyment reflected in the "strengthened" figure of his true "stepson" Nechaev.

The nature of the final challenge to God may be seen in this different light also if we juxtapose it with another challenge that takes place in *The Master of Petersburg*. In the disease-incubating cellar where the poorest of the poor vegetate, Nechaev challenges Dostoevsky to write a pamphlet on his stepson's death or actually on anything he pleases ("Whatever statement you choose to make. […] Whatever you write we will distribute, I promise" (198)). Thus the father is challenged to show his mettle – to take a side, in other words, to choose a truth, the truth of the Father (the police that represent the monarchy) or the truth of the son (revolution). And Dostoevsky's choice is the one which may be expected – he chooses to sentimentalise over an innocent victim: "On the night of October 12th, in the year of our Lord 1869, my stepson Pavel Alexandrovich Isaev fell to his death from the shot tower on Stolarny Quay. A rumour has been circulated that his death was brought about by the Third Section of the Imperial Police. This rumour is a wilful fabrication. I believe that my stepson was murdered by his false friend Sergei Gennadevich Nechaev" (202–203). This choice is not surprising, since if Dostoevsky had chosen otherwise, he would have to admit to the obscene nature of the main images that populated his imagination (God, tsar, Russian People) and with taking upon himself his obscenity he would have to admit that, to the obscene step-

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[49] Although Raskolnikov falls sick and repents, this can be taken as Dostoevsky's tortured self-censorship before the image of the Father: the one who raises his hand against the obscenity of the Father (the usuress) has to repent. Nechaev (like many critics, including Lev Shestov) senses it correctly and dismisses the sentimentalised ending of *Crime and Punishmen*t: "Raskolnikov was at least alive, until he came down with the fever or whatever it was" (186).

[50] There is, however, another suicide in *The Possessed*, that of Kirillov who seeks thereby to prove that God does not exist, to take the position of God and become a new man beyond good and evil.

father's relief, his stepson is finally dead, and admit therefore to his indifference to the problem of who killed him. With the choice of the police truth, an unbelievably narcissistic explanation worthy of the Master is inevitable – "Pavel's death was merely the bait to lure him from Dresden to Petersburg. He has been the quarry all the time" (203) – as if revolution is being staged with the primary purpose of robbing him of his enjoyment.

It is difficult to believe that Nachaev, in challenging Dostoevsky, expects that the writer will be able to wipe his slate clean and recreate his symbolic universe from scratch, since, in the case of Dostoevsky, it would amount to admitting to the killing of his father (or the wish thereto) as well as his substitute, God ("we will go to God and stand before his throne and call him off," says Nechaev (190)). Thus, it is more likely that he does it to free himself from the last father that is left to him, the one who fathered him in the image of Raskolnikov – when he is "betrayed" by his spiritual father ("There are no limits to what a father can do" (194)), he at last becomes truly fatherless, the son who has "made [himself] over" (194), therefore becoming a real challenge to the established order, ready to bring about "the end of everything old, including fathers and sons" (189).

Therefore, what Dostevsky does in his final act may ultimately be conceived as a remedy for Nechaev's challenge, a repetition of his act of challengeing the Father, but this time directed at reinstating the Father's rule. Choosing the image of Pavel as the innocent victim is choosing everything that goes with it, everything that we have tried to analyse above. This means, among other things, choosing the image of God as a defense, a mask that covers the obscenity of the Father. However, corrupting the image of innocence into the image of the depraved Stavrogin is only a way of extracting even more enjoyment from it ("In the act of writing he experiences, today, an exceptional sensual pleasure" (245)). As was the case with Dostoevsky's self-abasement in front of his wife or in front of the image of Pavel, the more serious the offence, the more self-laceration it demands and, therefore, the more enjoyment it brings. And the more enjoyment it brings, the stronger the image of God has to become, since it is the mask which hides the obscene Father who enjoys. Thus, paradoxically, after the choice has been made (innocent victim) the more challenging the act, the stronger faith it results in (the stronger image of God) because the more enjoyment it brings. "A trap to catch God" (249) turns out to be just another device to catch enjoyment of the Father ("he and God circle each other. […] Time is suspended, everything is suspended before the fall" (249) – does this not bring

to mind Dostoevsky and Anna "gyrating slowly" while making love?). But whence his final bitterness: "He has betrayed everyone; nor does he see that his betrayals could go deeper"? (250)

There is something interesting about the "unhistorical" twist to the story of the real Pavel Isaev, the one who did not die in 1869. This "perversion of the truth" seems to constitute a kind of act of faith on the part of the author of *The Master of Petersburg*: although he includes a "lie" in his plot, such a lie can be conceived as taking the side of historical Dostoevsky; in other words, identifying with him on a level deeper than that of "mere" truth (Dostoevsky liked to keep up appearances of Pavel being a good son – as he liked to pretend his father was a proper nobleman – while he knew it to be false). Gentrifying the image of Pavel by letting him die at the right moment, the author can be said to fulfil Dostoevsky's secret wish and therefore to do much more than just attempt imaginatively to step into his shoes to lend more psychological or "existential" truth to his character. We are not speaking about an act of faith by chance – in a famous letter Dostoevsky declares that if Christ were not the truth and he had to choose, he would abandon the truth and follow Christ.[51] Isn't *The Master of Petersburg* an example of such a thorough identification? But after all we have said about enjoyment in this novel, a perversity at its core may not really come as a surprise: can't we therefore conceive of the whole book as a hallucinatory realisation of Dostoevsky's wishes, of the stepfather who did *not* go to Petersburg in October 1869 but who had to withstand the whirlwind of letters from his stepson demanding money and accusing him of being a bad father? Can't we take the following fragment coming from the last chapter of *The Master of Petersburg* as the proper beginning of the book, presenting a perverse defensive hallucination, complete with the clarity and voluptuousness of the fall?

> Yet at the same time that he sits here so calmly, he is a man caught in a whirlwind. Torrents of paper, fragments of an old life torn loose by the roar of the upward spiral, fly all about him. High above the earth he is borne, buffeted by currents, before the grip of the wind slackens and for a moment, before he starts to fall, he is allowed utter stillness and clarity, the world opening below him like a map of itself. […] Letters from the whirlwind. Scattered leaves, which he gathers up; scattered body, which he reassembles. (245–46)

[51] A letter from February 1854 to N. Fonvizina. The claim is repeated in *The Possessed* by Shatov who relates that he heard it *from Stavrogin*.

Disgrace (1999)

Disgrace begins, like every decent modernist novel, with a display of the Twilight of the Gods mood. The protagonist, David Lurie, an adjunct professor at the Cape Town Technical University ("formerly Cape Town University College"[1]), feels that he is a clerk "in a post-religious age" (4): formerly a professor of modern languages (with three books published, on opera, on "vision as eros" (4), and on Wordsworth) he has to teach "Communication Skills" in a new "rationalised" university and "because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students" (4). The only outlet for the literary passions he has left is one special-field course a year, which he is allowed to offer "irrespective of enrolment, because it is good for morale" (3). But the course in the Romantic poets he is giving when the novel opens is a sordid business, we are given to understand: "He has long ceased to be surprised at the range of ignorance of his students. Post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate, they might as well have been hatched from eggs yesterday" (32). The older teachers ("his colleagues from the old days" (4)) have become bureaucrats of a "rationalised" institution "burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform" (4), the younger ones, like the students, come "postliterate," only to learn and then teach "skills." So what is wrong with "this […] emasculated institution of learning" (5) he finds himself in and which he does not respect?

His general complaints and caustic remarks about the university and its students have a more personal side to them which puts into

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), 3; further references in the body of the text.

sharper focus their "universalist" pretensions as comments on the state of western civilisation:

> His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mothers, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life.
>
> Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her. (7)

A telling parallel to the descent from the era of disinterested, but at the same time passionate, involvement in one's discipline to the enrolment- (that is money-) oriented truncated tertiary educational institution. As the underside of cultural frustration we find sexual frustration and what links them even closer is the inefficacy of "cultural goods" in mediating the sexual act with – in order to make love to a student, Melanie Isaacs, Lurie has to "buy" or impress her, yet she is not very much impressed with Wordsworth, nor with the video of a dance act he shows her. Although he is a connoisseur, "guardian of the culture-hoard" (16) on whose mediating power he has to rely now, that power seems not to be effective upon the post-Christian postliterate. If the pupil of the Romantic poets he considers himself to be cannot bring off seduction ("The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent's words, now only estranges" (16)), there must be something constitutionally wrong with this world. But, of course, Lurie is too intelligent to think only that.

"Do you have any literary passions?" he asks Melanie, and is nonplussed by her frown at the strange word (13). In the same conversation he calls Wordsworth one of his masters and talks about poetry thus: "In my experience poetry speaks to you either at first sight or not at all. A flash of revelation and a flash of response. Like lightning. Like falling in love" (13). And it is precisely passion and love that become the key terms in his ironic challenge to the authority of the university. But what kind of passion does he have in mind? After all, the "rationalised" university is definitely not devoid of all

passions, even if what is left be only a passion to enrol as many students as possible to make ever more money. Lurie provides his challenge precisely at the two points that we know to be his passionate investments: Wordsworth and opera.

When Lurie reads the definition of language in his Communication Skills handbook he has only scorn for it. It goes: "human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other" (3–4). Lurie's reply is that "the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul" (4). There is an irreducible void, a gap at the origin of language or the symbolic order, which the signifiers always unsuccessfully try to fill, to "suture." This, obviously, is a far cry from the handbook definition (Communication Skills seems to be a kind of applied linguistics) of language as a system of laws to be mastered to pass along pre-existent information, a system or structure that can be exhaustively rendered by the dispassionate metalanguage of positive knowledge. And Lurie's challenge to the university discourse lies in the conclusion he draws from this: since it is impossible to be passionately involved with metalinguistic laws, enjoyment of the university discourse must come from somewhere else, that is, from the approval of the master, the powers-that-be whose interests the "rationalisations" of the university serve[2] – rather than getting off on knowledge as passionate investment, the "rationalised" academics get off on their alienation, their justification of the master's discourse.

Lurie's characteristics of the institution he finds himself in echoes closely Lacan's description of the university discourse, in which knowledge takes the place of master signifier[3]:

$$\frac{S_2}{S_1} \rightarrow \frac{a}{\not S}$$

Lacan's point is to a large extent the same as Lurie's: knowledge (S_2 as the supposedly coherent system of signifiers) interrogates a (surplus *jouissance*) – the incoherence of the symbolic order (the void at its origin), a little piece of the real, something that does not

[2] Fake rationalisation of social and economic relations.

[3] The meaning of the mathemes of all four principal Lacanian discourses is developed in detail in: Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar XVII), trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). The mathemes used here are the simplified versions of the ones to be found in: Jacques Lacan, *Encore* (Seminar XX), trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 16.

fit into the system – in order to rationalise it. Or in different terms: linguistics poses language as a system entirely explainable by means of laws of cause and effect. Yet the product of this is $, the alienated subject in a double sense of the word: the void (the gap between the cause and the effect) is only dissimulated by the scientific laws that purport to explain all the field (if they do not, this is considered to be only temporary), so the product is self-deception; the obverse side of this is the production of the unknowing subject or the subject of the unconscious which is created by the university discourse, but at the same time excluded by it to maintain the consistency of its laws.[4] The truth of the university discourse is S_1, the master signifier or the signifier of the master, which is nonsensical because it consists of only the injunction to obey: the master must be obeyed not because there is some rationale (scientific or not) for it but because he says so, or rather wills so. A more political explanation of the university discourse matheme would be: university knowledge (S_2) interrogates surplus value subtracted from the worker (a) and justifies exploitation – the product of this is the alienated subject ($), and the whole process serves the interest of the master (the capitalist (S_1)).[5] In other words, the university discourse is only an incarnation of the discourse of the master, which tries to cover up by means of its rationalisations the inconsistency on which it is founded. What is more, it gets off on its own alienation: in Lacan's mathemes of the discourses the place of *jouissance* is always the right-hand "denominator" – in the university discourse it is $.[6] The enjoyment seems to be extracted from the very process of dissimulating the master, of convincing others and oneself that the laws to be obeyed are "objective" and leave no surplus – the law of the master is presented as the unavoidable law of Nature, Logic, History, Market, etc. (the unalienated discourse of the master did not have to pretend that it was founded on "objective laws," it did not justify his "Obey!").

What discourse does Lurie counter the university discourse with? It is not difficult to see what that would be in Lacan's mathemes – it is the hysteric's discourse:

$$\frac{\$}{a} \rightarrow \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

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[4] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 132.

[5] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 132.

[6] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 198.

It is easy to notice at first sight that the hysteric's discourse is the exact reversal of the university discourse and that S_2 (knowledge) appears in the place of *jouissance*. The hysteric[7] addresses the master signifier S_1 (in our present case, this is rationalised university knowledge – linguistics and its claims) and calls it into question. It is found lacking and in this lack the hysteric finds his knowledge S_2 (the knowledge of the lack in knowledge) whose truth is object *a* (inconsistency, gap, void). Rather than accepting the Communication Skills definition of language, Lurie contests it with his hypothesis (passionate belief?) that the truth of language is the void, which the human voice tries to fill with signifiers. In other words, the hysteric's discourse is based on the intimation of the difference between the symbolic order (a system of signifiers) and "something more" which makes language (and the human being as the user and product of language) what it is. This "something more" is of course object *a*, a place where the real enters language and scrambles the smooth functioning of linguistic laws. The gap opens up a space for human desire and therefore the hysteric's knowledge is *eroticised*. In other words, it is only in the hysteric's discourse that knowledge (founded on the lack) becomes the end in itself, while in the university discourse "knowledge is not so much the end in itself as that which justifies the academic's very existence and activity."[8]

Moreover, Lurie despises the institution he works in not for not being what it can never by its nature become but mainly for the failure to live up to its notion, and here he again scores a Lacanian point: for the late Lacan it is the hysteric's discourse which is the true discourse of science. In the seventies he comes to the conclusion that there are two discourses that operate in science: the spurious science of the university discourse and the proper science that takes the hysterical position with respect to its field, that is, it interrogates the master discourse (of its field) and finds it lacking. But the lack we are speaking about here is not a hole that it will be possible to fill with "more knowledge" produced by the master discourse but the gap that is structurally necessary for a given field of knowledge to constitute itself – something that is not just "yet unknown," but what cannot be known for structural reasons.[9]

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[7] For Lacan, the hysteric's discourse is, like his other discourses, a type of social bond, and not necessarily the discourse that a "clinical" hysteric always has to adopt (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 129–30).

[8] Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 133.

[9] Fink's example from physics is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: one can only measure either position or momentum of a particle, never both. This impossibil-

In other words, the true scientist subtracts something from the field and makes it not-whole; he confronts head-on the necessary antagonism, the inconsistency of his field. There appears something in the field that does not obey its laws and therefore disrupts the smooth functioning of the cause-effect determination chain; there is a point at which causality breaks down, so the field of knowledge ceases to coincide with itself.[10] In the same sense, the message in speech ("thoughts, feelings and intentions") is not what primarily constitutes the field of language; there has to be something else that enables the passage of messages, and, what is more, since it is not just another message and cannot be explained by the systematic laws of passing messages, it impairs their smooth functioning. In Lurie's terms, song encroaches on the systematic field of communication laws and wreaks havoc on it.

This non-identity of the field of speech with itself (the gap in it) is precisely what makes desire possible. This is the logic behind falling in love with a language, in Lurie's case with Wordsworth: "In my experience poetry speaks to you either at first sight or not at all. A flash of revelation and a flash of response. Like lightning. Like falling in love" (13). One does not fall in love with the long dead poet's thoughts (unclear), feelings (old-fashioned) or intentions (unknown), one can only fall in love with his song, something in his language that makes it more than the expression of thoughts, feelings and intentions, something that arouses, hooks up to one's desire, something that makes it flow; and any attempt to "explain" Wordsworth in terms of his thoughts, feeling and intentions is only an attempt to dissimulate the gap that enables the work of desire, and therefore an attempt to chastise literature of desire and make it into the object of systematic knowledge. In other words, the hysteric's discourse passionately engages in maintaining the gap in the field that produces this passionate engagement, while the university discourse sets itself the task of closing the gap, suturing it to be able to master the field. This is the connoisseur's discourse opposed to the discourse of the master.

This, however, is not all we get to know about Lurie's cultural desire. His relation to the master's discourse is more convoluted that it would appear to be from his half-joking engagement in theoris-

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ity cannot be overcome by particle physics because it grounds it (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 134).

[10] Another famous example from physics: a photon can pass through two separate slits at the same moment. The identity principle no longer operates: how can it be in two different places at the same time?

ing language. Not surprisingly, the other side of this relation is displayed in Lurie's lecture on Wordsworth. It appears at a moment of exasperation in one of his lectures to seemingly uncomprehending students. Lurie is explaining the feeling of grief Wordsworth feels at seeing Mont Blanc for the first time in a passage from Book 6 of *The Prelude*:

> From a bare ridge we also first beheld
> Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
> To have a soulless image on the eye
> That had usurped upon a living thought
> That never more could be. (21)[11]

He speaks to the students about pure ideas of the mind, imagination usurped by mere sense-images and the way in which Wordsworth tries to reconcile these two extremes in the lines:

> But to my conscious soul I now can say –
> "I recognise thy glory": in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours; whether we be young or old,
> Our destiny, our being's heart and home,
> Is with infinitude, and only there;
> With hope it is, hope that can never die,
> Effort, and expectation, and desire,
> And something evermore to be.[12]

The coming together of an image and infinitude is a *locus classicus* of the sublime feeling most famously expounded in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Kant's familiar example of the dynamic sublime is the feeling evoked by a spectacle of "furious" nature (storms, hurricanes, etc.), which, if beheld from a safe distance, on the one hand, makes us painfully aware of our weakness and insignificance in confrontation with such power, but, on the other, provides us with the pleasure of awareness that our capability of exercising reason lifts as above the condition of a being determined by nature. For Wordsworth, however, the "spectacle" of Mont Blanc is painful (grief) for a different reason: it is not equal to "a living thought," its original, "platonic," more beautiful image in his mind. In a certain

[11] *The Works of William Wordsworth* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 683.
[12] *The Works of William Wordsworth*, 684.

sense, the sense-image of the mountain becomes subtracted from an imaginary *plenum* of its "living image"; it introduces a cut that ruins the fullness, makes it not-whole and causes its differentiation from itself. Wordsworth's imagination tries to fill this gap but finds this task impossible. However, this self-shattering strain of imagination, this impossibility of repairing the image, paradoxically brings pleasure, because a similar feeling – self-shattering awe – was expected to be the outcome of confrontation with the sublime image of Mont Blanc in the first place. Therefore, the infinity "appended" to the image of Mont Blanc is ultimately not the positive infinity of which Nature is the expression (pantheistic transcendence), but the purely negative infinity of the impossibility of recovering the whole. And here we come back to Kant, although by a detour through Hegel: what Wordsworth experiences in his illumination is pure negativity as the primary feature of reason/spirit. What is introduced into the symbolic order here is a gap which imagination cannot fill. What momentarily comes to light in Wordsworthian sublime is the lack in the symbolic – an infinity whose other name is freedom (e.g. in the sense of the point in the symbolic that scrambles the functioning of its laws and from which the symbolic can be reconfigured into something quite new).

In the experience of encountering the abyss of freedom (pure negativity), Wordsworth ceases to be the master, but he reconfigures himself as one (and a typically Romantic master to boot) when he gentrifies this experience and interprets the sublime feeling as an indication of positive transcendence, when he imagines encountering in the doubling up of the image of Mont Blanc not the infinity of the void which scrambles the laws of the field in which it appears, but the infinity that confirms these laws; in other words, the infinity that makes us slaves to them (even if we do not feel their inevitability as enslavement). And it is precisely this "second" Wordsworth that becomes Lurie's master ("Wordsworth has been one of my masters," he says to a student (13)) and this is where Lurie withdraws from his hysteric's stance.

This comes out clearly at Lurie's moment of impatience with his students. When they do not seem to grasp the point he is explaining, he again takes love as a metaphor for what is meant in the passage: "Like being in love […]. If you were blind you would hardly have fallen in love in the first place. But now, do you truly wish to see the beloved in the cold clarity of the visual apparatus? It may be in your better interest to throw a veil over the gaze, so as to keep her alive in her archetypal, goddesslike form" (22). Lurie admits that "it is

hardly in Wordsworth," but what he is doing (leaving aside the unfortunate reference to blindness) is cutting his master to the shape of the secularised society and exchanging of that which is above (transcendence) for that which is behind ("the idea that lies buried more deeply in the soil of memory" (22)). It is neither corrosive negativity nor transcendent universality that shines through the image but the "all too human" universality of the archetype: when the beloved's image splits itself from itself, when she appears to us as "something more in her than herself," one has to domesticate this split and suture it throwing the veil of the archetype over it – the eminently Wordsworthian gesture, which is a betrayal of Wordsworth's original intuition.

It is also at odds with Lurie's own half-joking theory of human language where he identifies the source of this doubling up as original void and the element that tries to fill it as imageless (song or pure voice beyond signification). In his lecture he speaks of archetypes, ideas that lie "buried more deeply in the soil of memory" – in other words, images of the feminine or masculine sanctified by tradition with which one unconsciously identifies. Seeing the other through the veil of the archetype allows us to heal the narcissistic wound to our self-sufficiency, since a certain image of the feminine goes together with the complementary image of the masculine in the symbolic order and these images serve as models for a successful sexual relationship. Therefore the "archetypal" love is always narcissistic love, because in choosing a feminine archetype I also choose the masculine archetype to complement it, so the feminine image is only a mediated way to identify myself. (The same goes of course for a female choosing a masculine archetype.) What I choose, therefore, is the image which Freud called the ideal ego as the answer to the gaze of the authority which observes and judges me (the ego ideal), the place in the Other (the symbolic order in which I have been brought up), a signifier operating as my ideal point of identification in what Lurie calls "the culture-hoard." Yet if it is only the archetype that allows us to relate to the opposite sex, we are not only condemned to narcissistic masturbatory relationships, we are also condemned to the "eternally feminine" which underlies each new feminine icon – in other words, we will always repeat the patriarchal relationship of the past, no matter how it is dissimulated in a given epoch.

So what is the psychic mechanism that produces the "archetypal sublime" and the logic of narcissistic identification? One does not have to look far to find that the logic of the sublime is very similar

to the logic of the superego[13]: the spectacle of furious nature, as the voice of the punishing superego, humiliates the ego and teaches it its insignificance, while at the same time the ego congratulates itself on possessing reason, and thus the ability to disengage itself from nature. In other words, it congratulates itself on its power to overcome its weakness and sacrifice its pathological (guided by self-interest) motives on the altar of an ideal which is produced at the point of symbolic identification and which is the origin of the image of oneself behaving accordingly. We find here not only the logic of the Kantian sublime, but also the logic of Freudian sublimation, or at least what is popularly understood as Freudian sublimation, that is, redirection of sexual energies into a culturally validated activity.

What causes the desexualisation of a part of libidinal energy is what Freud at first called the ego ideal,[14] and which in his second topic (id, ego, superego) was reworked into the agency of superego. And it is not surprising that the tentative elaboration of the mechanism of sublimation is undertaken by Freud in the work called "On Narcissism," since the work of overcoming pathological motivations or overcoming immediate sexual satisfaction is what brings narcissistic satisfaction to the subject (he is able to identify with a better image of himself). The feeling of sublimity (pleasure in pain) is precisely the feeling evoked by such superegoic sublimation. Hence Lacan's dictum that the superego's injunction is ultimately "Enjoy!"[15] But that is not all: since the superego is precisely the agency that enjoins the ego to sublimely overcome itself, enjoyment or, in other words narcissistic satisfaction, becomes its *duty*[16] and is posed as an ethical standard. We end up here with a kind of aesthetic standard

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[13] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 151–52.

[14] A place in the symbolic order from which the subject is looked at, the place of authority as different from the image with which one identifies: the ideal ego.

[15] In contrast to Freud, who seems to use the terms "ego ideal" and "superego" interchangeably in *The Ego and the Id*, Lacan distinguishes between them, the ego ideal being a place of symbolic identification (the signifier) and the superego being the voice of the surplus that every Law produces. This voice is the maternal agency, which is produced in the gaps or inconsistencies of the paternal Law (prohibition of enjoyment, symbolic castration) and constitutes its obscene support. Since the Law symbolically castrates the subject (he has nothing to enjoy with, enjoyment is structurally inaccessible) and that maternal injunction is to enjoy, the superegoic agency is a masochistic component of the subject.

[16] Leo Bersani, "Erotic Assumptions: Narcissism and Sublimation in Freud," in: *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 39.

of ethics since its basic propelling power is fascination with an image – one's own image.

That is how we reach Lurie's "fall": he finally succeeds in seducing Melanie Isaacs, has a short troubled relationship with her (about one of their meetings he comments, "Not rape, not quite, but undesired nevertheless" (25)), encounters her furious boyfriend who has been told of everything, and then her parents who also know, and after that she complains of harassment to the university authorities and drops out of the university.

To the university committee before which he appears he pleads guilty and behaves generally in a quixotic way, rejecting any suggestions that he should try to keep his job by making a public act of contrition. Generally his attitude is ironic, and when pressed he claims to have been "a servant of Eros" (52). With this we come to the other side of his challenge to the university discourse as the discourse of the master: his claim to be "the servant of desire" is based on the status of seduction as autonomous activity ("As for impulse, it was far from ungovernable. I have denied similar impulses many times in the past, I am ashamed to say" (52)). Seduction, in itself constituting a field that is not-whole (the impulse is unexplainable in terms of causes and effects but it can be resisted or suppressed), is opposed to the discourse of Political Correctness, which he considers to be the secularised ("rationalised," "universitised") discourse of the master, as, in his opinion, can be seen in its demands for confession, contrition and repentance (God as the ultimate master) as well as self-abasement in front of the audience (Stalin's Russia, Mao's China). Yet again the truth of his challenge to the discourse of the master unexpectedly puts us on the side of the master.

When his daughter calls him a scapegoat he says, "Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism. The censor was born […]. Purgation was replaced by the purge" (91). The transcendent authority is dead and now the mortals have to decide how to remit their sins, or, in modern times, they have to decide which actions are morally wrong. Yet the moral substance of a deed can only be appropriately established after its commission, taking into consideration its real and not imaginary outcome. In a parallel way, when the hegemonic cultural authority is dead in the postliterate world, the

clear rules of the ritual of seduction die with it and now they come to appear only in the retroactive manner: one discloses one's desire to the other and it is up to the other to decide if the maxim on which one acted was appropriate (seduction) or inappropriate (harassment). There are no pre-established ritual gestures to rely on.[17] So again Lurie's complaint is ultimately about the loss of the master who ordered the field in a way that was predictable for (and enforceable by) the guardians of the culture-hoard.

In the end, Lurie voluntarily destroys his former life as a university professor for good. He presents the whole affair as a case of standing up for one's principles and comes out of it, in his own eyes, "heroic": he sacrifices everything in his life (his position and the comfortable livelihood that goes with it) apart from what he considers to be his honour (as an autonomous academic and as a human being). He turns down the committee's suggestion that he takes counselling because it would imply that he was not responsible for his deeds; public contrition he treats as a TV-propelled narcissistic need for self-abasement, which is despicable. He parades Blake's phrase "sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires" as his credo. So did he not give up on his desire? To answer this question, let us return to the matter of identification.

Lurie calls Wordsworth one of his masters but, as "a guardian of the culture-hoard," he does not really feel at home outside the city. He quotes Blake but is himself completely lacking in visionary impulse. He gives honour as the signifier of his identification but for the truth of this position we have to look somewhere else: it comes from a poet who seems much more to his taste, more ironic but also more melodramatic, both in his life and work.

Discussing with his students Byron's "Lara," what he says about Lucifer sounds, especially in retrospect (taking his own "fall" into consideration), like a description of his model hero:

> "Erring": a being who chooses his own path, who lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself. […] He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him. […] His madness was not of the head, but heart. […] Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not

[17] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 111.

> one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, a monster. Finally Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in a deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude. (32–34)

So here we have it: Lucifer as a sublimated image of Byron and both the symbolic authority that Lurie tries to please – the typical Byronic protagonist is a great sinner but it is precisely his dark secret that makes him magnetic.

The whole of Lurie's "trial," in spite of the second thoughts he might have had, is staged for the eyes and ears of the "Byronic" tribunal much more than before the harassment committee. That is why the whole affair does not really scar Lurie's self-image at all – if anything, he comes out of his trial with a more consolidated ego, proud of himself for behaving "heroically" passing his ethical test with flying colours. One can even claim that he enjoys the whole process (superegoic aggressiveness sublimated in the painful pleasure of standing for a principle) and his "social death," instead of humiliating him, makes him even stronger. This is why he can bring himself to apologise to Melanie's father only after his Romantic identifications are at least partially gone. The point is not that Lurie has to experience the rape of his daughter to be able to put himself in the place of Isaacs (so to identify with his role as the father in the symbolic order),[18] but precisely the opposite: he can relate to him only when he ceases to identify himself in Isaacs's way, when instead of asking, as Isaacs does, the hysteric question, "What does God want from you?" (in his version it would be something like "What does Eros-cum-romanticised-Satanic-honour want from you?" – the same question formulated from exactly the opposite position of the same constellation), he is on the threshold of entering a new symbolic (and rather feminine) dispensation. That is also why he perceives Isaacs (his own reversed image) as an obscene father playing his own tricks of discourse and why now he can detachedly fulfil what this obscene master wants from him – he mockingly goes through the spectacle of self-abasement falling to his knees and prostrating himself before the Isaacs family.

Let us, however, come back to the aftermath of the "fall." After the scandal and his forced resignation from the university, he goes to live temporarily with his daughter Lucy on a farm where she runs a boarding kennel and grows flowers and garden produce. Apart from the two of them, there is also Petrus, a middle-aged black, Lucy's as-

[18] A melodramatic interpretation, some reviewers have suggested.

sistant and recently co-proprietor, and his wife. One day Lurie and his daughter are attacked and robbed by three black men, she is raped and he is beaten and burned. During the attack Petrus is not in the vicinity.

The first and greatest injury to Lurie is the rape of his daughter; it is more painful for him that his burns and humiliation and we can suppose more painful than if he had been raped himself. He is desperate and almost insane, overflowing with fatherly feelings, yet his first "discursive" reaction to what happened to his daughter is strangely Sadean: "Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. […] There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them" (98). It was Sade himself, in his "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," who promulgated a system of liberation of desire in which, among other things, theft is understood as socially justified (the more the poor steal from the rich, the wider – and therefore more justly – the goods are distributed) and each citizen is obliged to offer his or her body for the enjoyment of others. Only a system which consists of permanent ferment is fit to be the system of the republic – the moment the ferment subsides, the moment any stable relations appear, one finds himself again in a society of masters and servants.

Of course, Lurie finds "comfort" in this theory because it allows him momentarily to distance himself from his pain, but one might not be too surprised to find earlier in the novel another Sadean explanation. Explaining to Lucy what he means by "the rights of desire," he speaks about a dog their neighbours had: "Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on until the poor dog didn't know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide. […] What was ignoble about the […] spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate his nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself. At that point it would have been better to shoot it" (90). A strictly Sadean point, if applied to people, and of course Lurie means to illustrate what can happen to *human* desire, not to animal instinct.

Although what he is trying to do by means of his theory of circulation is only to screen himself from the irruption of the traumatic

real into his life, so this theory does not really try to explain the nature of what happened; we can take this theory as symptomatic of the truth hidden behind his benevolent theory of desire preached so far: in the fantasy of the Sadean "explanation" the aggressive underside of his desire comes to light.

The rape, however, has nothing to do with desire, or this is at least the way Lucy relates it to her father: "They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. […] I think they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental" (158), she says, dismissing her father's little theory. The symbolic debt of apartheid is being paid here and the point is not the pleasure or desire but *Herrschaft*,[19] which Lucy carefully separates from another term. When Lurie, speaking about the rapists, says: "They want you for their slave," Lucy objects: "Not slavery. Subjection. Subjugation" (159). While slavery, although founded on violence, is a kind of social contract, subjugation is just negation, and this was what made the rape most shocking for her: "It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything" (156). But, of course, Lucy is wrong to call this hatred personal since they had never set their eyes on her before; the hatred she experienced was the hatred of the debtor as such – the symbolic debtor who is no other than the obscene father of jouissance, the white master whose colonial enjoyment is seen as the enjoyment which is stolen from the blacks. It is not Lurie personally, of course, but he is nevertheless a perfect symbolic incarnation of colonial *jouissance*: the connoisseur of exquisite cultural pleasures which can be enjoyed due to the history of colonial exploitation – as in the case of his philandering, his position in the system is one of power (even if disavowed). But who is the one that sees it? It is the Other (the symbolic order) where the (symbolic) debt is registered and the whole spectacle is organised for its gaze. The rapists, like all sadists, are only the instruments of the Other, instruments by means of which the Other's will to enjoy is to be realised, as the sadist does not perform what he does for his own pleasure but so that the Other can enjoy.[20] Like the Sadean libertines in *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* the rapists find excitement not in "what is here" (rape does not change anything as far as their dis-

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[19] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Seminar XI), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), 183.

[20] This does not mean that in performing the sadistic act the sadist does not enjoy, but that it is precisely his instrumentalisation that he finds pleasurable.

possession is concerned) but in "what is not here"[21] – what propels them is the idea of "getting even." Therefore, it is crucial that the rape be multiple; it has to be registered by the gaze of the Other, which in this case is represented by the other members of the "creditor" community for whom the rape has also "educational" value: "He was there to learn" (159), says Lucy about the boy among the rapists – he is not there to learn that banging girls against their will is fun but to learn that there is a debt to be paid (since he might be too young to remember apartheid). "They must have had every reason to be pleased with their afternoon's work; they must have felt happy in their vocation," muses Lurie (159).

The catastrophe transforms Lurie completely but not all at once, as is shown by his quick concoction of a desire distribution theory in reaction to what has happened. Yet something happens to him and we can trace its origin to the moment during the attack when he "goes mad": "he throws himself about, hurling shapeless bellows that have no words behind them, only fear" (96); and a few moments later: " 'Lucy!' he shouts, over and over, till he can hear an edge of craziness in his voice" (97). What we have here is a telling juxtaposition to his aestheticising theories of the origin of human language. The abyss of subjectivity turns out not to be the sublimating song but the scream as uncontrolled reaction to the pure horror of the traumatic real. In this scream, all Lurie's imaginary and symbolic identifications are resolved and he encounters his core as empty. "This attitude of radical impassivity, of the helpless witness who can only observe the inexorable run of things, unable to affect its course with [his] intervention, is the zero-level of subjectivity: I can only experience this inexorable fate as an unbearable dread *insofar as I subtract from it my subjective position of enunciation, insofar as I am not fully immersed into it*."[22] There is no longer a master signifier (like "honour") that he can hold on to and the result is the involuntary scream in which he experiences a thorough subjective destitution in which the consistency of his world comes apart – in other words, he undergoes symbolic death. The encounter does not transform his life immediately – as we have noted, when the attackers go away he immediately returns to his old symbolic identifications (circulation of desire, etc.) – but the experience of the void of himself will not be forgotten and the rest of his story describes

[21] Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in: *Masochism* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 28.

[22] Slavoj Žižek, "I Do not Order My Dreams," in: Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002), 195.

the process of letting go of everything he used to be. The event is the beginning of a process that can be called the proper process of sublimation, not understood as a redirection of sexual energies into "higher" aesthetic activities, but as a process in which one separates oneself from the Other.[23]

The scream is also a watershed in Lurie's life in another sense: "His pleasure in life has been snuffed out" (107) – his desire and everything that it implies is radically curtailed. What we witness in the scream is also the dying scream of the father of enjoyment, the non-castrated father of the primal horde who could enjoy all women, the great myth of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. The scream announces the death of the uncastrated colonial father of *jouissance* who could enjoy all colonial pleasures as his due, stealing them from the colonial subjects and feeling no guilt – which is also a kind of retroactive myth.

In a classic essay, Theodor Reik[24] interprets the droning sound of a primitive Jewish horn, the shofar, used in the Yom Kippur ritual, as "the endlessly prolonged scream of the suffering-dying-impotent-humiliated father."[25] Although the official version of the Jewish tradition is that the sound of the shofar imitates the sound of the thunder that was heard when Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, and thus stands as the commemoration of the founding gesture of the Law, both interpretations refer to the same scene of foundation of the covenant: what happens on Mount Sinai is comparable to what happens in the Freudian myth where the brothers kill their father (who obeys nothing but his chaotic drives) only to elevate him to the status of the symbolic authority from which prohibition originates, the-Name-of-the-Father which guarantees the Law, and is the beginning of the new dispensation. Therefore the strange fact that it is the father who screams during the rape while his daughter is surprisingly quiet finds justification in the fact that, for Lacan, the Law is always subsumed under the paternal metaphor, so that it always reverberates with the echo of the father's scream. What is crucial about the shofar is the "association of its sound with the traumatic, shattering moment of the *institution of the Law*: in so far as we re-

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[23] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 45.

[24] Theodor Reik, *Das Ritual: Psychoanalytische Studien* (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1928).

[25] Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: The Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 150; in further interpretation of the shofar I rely on this text.

main *within* the Law, its origin is *sensu stricto* unthinkable – that is to say, the rule of the Law presupposes the 'foreclosure' of its ('illegal') origins; its performative efficiency relies on our accepting it as always-already-given."[26] The primordial crime has to remain "foreclosed," because in the language inherited from the old order there are no names for it ("*War, atrocity*: every word with which one tries to wrap up this day, the day swallows down its black throat" (102)), and because physical violence in general is something that does not speak. Every time Lurie tries to make Lucy tell the police what happened to her, she counters with: you don't understand, you weren't there, you don't know what happened. Even when he proceeds to the description of the scene: "You were raped. Multiply. By three men. […] You were in fear of you life. You were afraid that after you had been used you would be killed" (157), she counters him with "And?", as if his names for what happened were beside the point. And he is conscious of it himself: "he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160).[27] But there is a reason which is even more important: the confession – to the ineffectual guardians of the old order, the police, for instance – will render impossible the constitution of the new order repeatedly confronting it with its "illegality" (its criminal origin). The new paternal figure, Petrus, promises that "now it is all right" (138), if Lucy remains "a forward-looking lady, not backward-looking" (136). If the "origin" (violence) does not remain "foreclosed," it will have to repeat itself in one form or another again and again.

Petrus's involvement in the affair is ambiguous and there are hints that he might have had a hand in provoking the attack. The fact remains that on the day of rape he disappeared from the scene for no apparent reason. This would seem to put Petrus in an awkward position as the new figure of the symbolic authority, the Name-of-the-Father, but such "shadiness" of the figure of the Law is precisely what allows it to function. For in order to be operative the Law has to split itself into two figures, or rather, its split origin (illegal beginning of legality) makes it function properly only when it is doubled up. What we witness in the new dispensation is Petrus as the guardian of the letter of the Law (of prohibition), the Name-of-the-Father, and another presence that hides in the cracks and

[26] Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 153.

[27] Of course, apart from these "structural" reasons, another reason why the scene of rape is "foreclosed" from the book is that what applies to Lurie also applies to Coetzee as an author.

inconsistencies of the Law – we encounter here none other than the reincarnated father of enjoyment. And it is not difficult to find him; it is enough to ask who the figure is that revolts the (symbolically) dead *jouisseur* the most, somebody who is his incarnation in the new order, and because of that the most disgusting. It is Pollux, the boy rapist, who is the new representative of the obscene, enjoying side of symbolic authority. Petrus is the man of contracts (laws): his proposal to marry Lucy has nothing to do with enjoyment, but is a means to exchange land for protection, and, even more importantly, a remedy offered to retroactively cover the wound in the real by dissimulating it symbolically,[28] while Pollux is an obscene *jouisseur* peeping in on Lucy while she takes a bath (a spitting image of Lurie's desirousness). Petrus's promise is: "I will protect her" (139); Pollux's echo is: "We will kill you all!" (207) (the echo of the uncastrated father and the primordial founding crime). What we have here are two faces of the Law: the official, legalistic, disinterested side, and the other one, the side of obscene rituals which go against the letter of the law, but which are practised and accepted by the members of a given community precisely because those common "transgressions" constitute the bond of the community (without it, the "communal spirit" would cease to exist). If the outsider does not know the obscene rituals, the formal side of the law will always remain dysfunctional and a dead letter to him – justice will always remain indefinitely adjourned until he learns the obscene underside that makes the official side work.[29] Thus, although "something is wrong with him" (207) ("Morally deficient. Mentally deficient" (208)), Pollux "is here [says Lucy], he won't disappear in a puff of smoke, he is a fact of life" (208) – in order for the Law to operate Pollux and his "impure" desire would have to be handled.

What is more, the doubling of the Father (Petrus/Pollux) is precisely the point that Lurie tried to dissimulate in his dealings with the university committee: he claimed there that the discourse of the (dead) letter of the Law (the "neutral," castrated, delibidinised signifier) and obscene *jouissance* of this letter (whether in seduction or confession) are not the same, being himself the incarnation of such

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[28] The sons, after killing their father, make him into the highest and all-powerful authority who guarantees the laws, therefore they could not have killed him; Lucy is a pregnant woman, now she has a husband who is the figure of authority in the vicinity, so the rape could not have happened.

[29] Such functioning of the law is most brilliantly described in Kafka's novels, and analysed by Slavoj Žižek in *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), chapter 8.

doubling as both the figure of authority to the students (a professor) and their obscene *jouisseur*. This is precisely what he is accused of by the committee and what they demand of him is not to change (as he conceives of it), but really just "to come out of the closet," to make public the *jouissance* of authority he has practised so far in private, to turn it into the *jouissance* of disgraced authority breast-beating in front of the cameras. To use a Lacanian expression: in dealings with the harassment committee, Lurie receives the truth of his position from the Other in the inverted form.

Now, after the rape, he encounters the separation but this time he finds it horrifying. "You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. […] The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter" (112), says Lucy to him. This claim is completely incomprehensible to Lurie; the signifier "private" shines for him with a new, dark, uncanny light. It is as if it had been severed from the signifying chain of explanations, of causes and effects. In Lurie's discourse there is no place for such a signifier, so it tears a hole in the dissimulated whole of the symbolic order with which he identifies. In discursive/symbolic terms, what happens here is a repetition of what just happened in the real: Lurie's stitched-up discourse, awkwardly and temporarily "repaired" with theories of circulating of desire and vengeance ("It was a history of wrong speaking through them" (156)), is torn up again by encountering a signifier that for him does not seem to have any meaning, because it does not refer to anything he can find in the Other. So he painfully tries to stitch it up again by trying to explain what Lucy means by "privacy" in his own terms. But to no avail; he keeps being contradicted by his daughter: "Do you think that by meekly accepting what happened to you, you can set yourself apart from farmers like Ettinger [the paradigmatic master of apartheid addressing 'his' blacks as 'boys']?" – "I'm not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely." "Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" – "You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (112). And so on, almost to the end of the novel.

When his old point of keeping different (religious and secular) discourses apart fails, he tries to persuade Lucy to leave the farm, even go to Holland (where her mother lives). She will not listen and when he presses her she turns his implied argument about separate discourses on its head: "I wish I could explain. But I can't. Because of who you are and who I am, I can't" (155). And later: "It is as if

you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes" (161). It is Lucy who walks in the sun, and one does not have to go as far as to recall the Platonic cave to see the associations of light with knowledge or even wisdom. In order to get into the sunlight, however, one has to die to the world ("I am a dead person," she claims in the same letter to Lurie from which the above quote is taken (161)), to die in Paul's sense of dying to the old Law to be reborn in the new one, to be able to enter a new covenant. Lucy walks in the light precisely because of it, she even shines with this sublime light because she has taken a step beyond the Law, the old symbolic order.[30]

For Lurie, this sublime light is, however, inhuman. He keeps emphasising her lack of "ordinary human responses": she does not cry, she is stiff as a pole, she is reserved and composed. He tries to gentrify her behaviour by explaining it to himself as the aftermath of the shock, but she never changes; she remains this "different person" to the end of the book. He does not know how to handle this change and the effect is that he only exasperates his daughter. But what he is too afraid or too confused to admit about her, he freely recognises in the new order – for him it is monstrous. "This is not how we do things. […] *We Westerners*" (202), he is on the point of saying when Petrus comes up with his proposition to marry Lucy. ("It was blackmail pure and simple," he comments, and as we can expect his daughter corrects him: "It wasn't blackmail. You are wrong about that" (202)).

Lurie finds the new order completely at odds with his image of what the relations between humans should be, and here we find him ultimately as a participant in the Politically Correct discourse he formerly derided: the other is fine only as long as he is the specular image of myself, if he does not believe in the same values (like my inalienable right not to be disturbed in my self-realisation), he ceases to be the benign other whose rights I am told to respect and becomes a monstrosity (a fundamentalist, a terrorist, generally somebody the authority should protect me from). We do not need psychoanalysis to unravel the inconsistency behind this attitude (I should respect the other but only if he agrees to become the mirror image of myself), yet we may nevertheless use it.

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[30] There are certain parallels here to the sublime light radiated by Antigone in Lacan's analysis of her act (Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Seminar VII), trans. Dennis Potter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), chapters XIX–XXI).

There are two signifiers by which Petrus is described in the book: he refers to himself ironically as the dog-man (we will come to canine matters later), but there is yet another term for him: "It is hard to say what Petrus is, strictly speaking. The word that seems to serve best, however, is *neighbour*" (116). In the old days of apartheid Petrus's place in the symbolic order was fixed, he was a "boy," a servant of the master, not really to be reckoned with. Now he emerges as a neighbour and with this change his former master becomes hystericised by the question he has to confront now: what does he want from me? The appearance of this question in the intersubjective space signals the appearance of the *real* neighbour (in contrast to the imaginary one), whose desire is always enigmatic.[31] That is precisely why the commandment to love one's neighbour constituted for Freud such a scandal, an injunction impossible to obey.[32]

Lacan, discussing the nature of the good, returns to Freud's outrage and, with a reference to Bentham, turns our attention to the truth of the modern discourse of the good (the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people; a utilitarianism the modern version of which is PC discourse): "My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism, altruism of the kind that is situated on the level of the useful. […] It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That does not cost so much."[33] The point which is dissimulated, however, by such "goodness" is that "my neighbour's *jouissance*, his harmful, malignant *jouissance*, is what poses the problem for my love."[34] We encounter this problem in its classic formulation already in Augustine's reference to his younger brother sucking their mother's breast and Augustine's envy: what he envies is not the access to the object (in this case the mother's milk, which he would probably have found disgusting), but the very enjoyment itself.[35] So my neighbour's *jouissance* (his good) is something that I can never find because it has no discernible object, and since it cannot be found it is always treated as always already stolen from me, creating a trauma. Therefore, the neighbour can be a neutral subject of my benevolence or altruism

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[31] Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 109.

[32] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), 56–63.

[33] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 187.

[34] Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 187.

[35] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, par. 7, trans. E. B. Pusey. 7 July 2007. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H_4_0002>.

only if his good is the same as what I understand to be good – yet in such form the other ceases to be the other. Thus, when the real other appears he always materialises as a traumatising force, one whose *jouissance* is a scandal, ultimately directed against me, and therefore evil and monstrous. This is precisely what we find in Lurie who takes the traumatised position, while Lucy seems to have accomplished the impossible: to work through the traumas of the rape and of the neighbour.

To dissimulate the dimension of the impossible, Lurie keeps explaining to Lucy that her logic of sacrifice is a completely misguided strategy when one is dealing with vengeance. Taking Christ as the ideal ego does not make sense to him because it will not be able to stop the vicious circle of retribution: "This is not how vengeance works, Lucy. Vengeance is like fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets" (112). Whether this is a correct description of the mechanism of vengeance is debatable, but an interesting point is that Lurie offers here the precise logic of the superego: the superego, which is the propelling force of sacrifice. We have already described it on Lurie's example, when he sacrificed his academic career in order to keep intact his symbolic identifications and identify with the heroic image of himself. So, without saying it explicitly, Lurie accuses Lucy of his own flaw, that is, narcissism. Even worse, if we bear in mind the excessive satisfaction his own renunciation brought him, he accuses her between the lines of secretly enjoying her dispossession, that is, of masochism. We have also noted that Lucy keeps contradicting his claims and we have to take her word for it: she is not guided by the logic of sacrifice, it is not the superegoic image that stands behind her attitude.

Her choice has nothing to do with imaginary identifications. The case is exactly the opposite: rather than cover up the trauma with familiar discourse, the cost of which is the "inexplicable" experience of guilt we can see on Lurie's example, she exercises the power that was thrust on her by her subjective destitution: she steps out of her former symbolic universe (which lies in ruins anyway) and freely chooses what is inevitable. When the consistency of one's symbolic order is destroyed in the collapse of one's identifications, one realises that there is nothing precious in oneself, nothing one can sacrifice, and what is left to do is either trying to dissimulate the traumatic fact by pretending nothing happened to one's symbolic universe (but the repressed always returns through the cracks, as for Lurie) or to turn the catastrophe on its head and realise its liberating potential: I am no longer bound by who I imagined myself to be. The choice

is forced, so I can basically choose either mental collapse or a step forward into the future as somebody completely new.

What we encounter here is a structure of Heideggerian *Entwurf* as a paradoxical situation in which I freely choose my own destiny, freely assume the fate that is already mine.[36] This notion of choice is not a liberal individualist "choice between a series of objects [or actions] leaving my subjective position intact [should I choose public repentance or standing for a principle?], but the fundamental choice by means of which I 'choose myself.' "[37] The paradox here is that the choice is forced (so it has nothing to do with the symbolic positions with which I may or may not identify) but none the less it is autonomous. What is more, such choice retroactively "erases itself," because in choosing myself I choose that I have always been like that, that what the choice implies has always been my "nature": when I am interpellated as a Pole, the moment I recognise myself as a Pole means that I assume being Polish from birth on and the moment of interpellation as choice disappears from my history; it is only a moment in which I become conscious of what I always have already been. This is crucial from a Kantian ethical perspective – for Kant we act ethically only in obeying the injunction that is unconditional, that is, the one that is not pathological (not guided by self-interest). However, all our conscious choices are, or at least can be thought to be, at least minimally pathological, so the conclusion may be that only a forgotten choice, a forgotten injunction, can be strictly speaking unconditional and non-pathological.[38] "That is what Hegel has in mind when he claims that in the course of a dialectical process, the immediate starting point proves itself to be something already mediated, that is, its own self-negation; in the end, we ascertain that we always and already were what we wanted to become [or were forced to become], the only difference being that this always-already state changes its modality from in-itself to for-itself. The ethical is in this sense the domain of repetition qua symbolic."[39]

Lurie's understanding of autonomy (western liberal) as the force acting behind his choices in the harassment affair has already been discussed. But Lurie's discomfort with the ungraspable cause of Lucy's behaviour may also have a reverse side – that "object" in Lucy

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[36] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 184–88 and *passim*.

[37] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 18.

[38] Žižek, "I Do not Order My Dreams," 141.

[39] Žižek, "I Do not Order My Dreams," 152.

that has no cause,[40] that he cannot include in the chains of explanations, the behaviour of Lucy that is for him totally irrational and "impossible" is a reminder to him of his own moment of subjective dispossession in the scream, the moment when he ceased to be who he formerly was but did not have the courage to turn this moment of loss into a moment of liberation from the tyranny of the Other. Yet Lurie, in his own way, constantly experiences this moment of the impossible as another moment of nonsensical contradiction in his symbolic world: he feels guilty that he did not save Lucy, although he knows perfectly well that it was not in his power to do anything to stop the course of events.[41] This is especially strange because in his former life (before the rape) the feeling of guilt was completely strange to him; all he had to do to absolve himself of it was to refer to the ultimate cliché that he just is who he is: "That is his temperament. His temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed and set" (2). He was not born to be a husband, it is his temperament to be a servant of Eros, and so on. Now, however, the feeling of guilt persistently reminds him of something in which he failed and which he does not want to know about: that there is something impossible he can accomplish. In this mood he quotes Rilke: "*Du musst dein Leben ändern!*: you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour" (209).

At first glance the passage looks familiar; Lurie activates the same defences as usual to keep his identifications intact: honour, a temperament unable to reform itself. But the old excuses are juxtaposed with the quote from a poem which does not really fit in Lurie's intended context: in Rilke's poem it is beauty – Apollo's archaic torso – that enjoins the viewer to change his life, beauty that is wild and broken:

> Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
> unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
> und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle.[42]

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[40] For Lacan the object without the cause (excluded from the signifying chain) is the cause of anxiety as distinct from fear, which has a cause (Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 144).

[41] According to Kant such split in the subject is where freedom manifests itself – see: Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 25–27.

[42] "Archaïscher Torso Apollos," in: Reiner Maria Rilke, *Poezje* (bilingual edition), trans. Mieczysław Jastrun (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1987), 124. In translation by David Young: "And then this stone would stand here, short and broken, / under the shoulders' clear, cascading plunge / and wouldn't ripple like a wild beast's

The point is precisely that true beauty tears out a hole in one's world and confronts one with what can be glimpsed on the other side, something that destroys the peaceful surface of one's habitual identifications. It is enough to recall another famous passage from Rilke's "First Duino Elegy," where beauty is only "the beginning of the terrible" that despises our destruction:

> [...] Denn das Schöne ist nichts
> als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
> und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
> uns zu zerstören [...][43]

Therefore, the monstrous new order, which Lurie cannot comprehend, is unwittingly (unconsciously?) referred to by him as the modality of the beautiful, or rather – in Kantian parlance – the sublime.[44] In this sense, the monstrous and the sublime coincide, and the new always comes in the mask of the terrible, because it "despises our destruction," that is, it is incomprehensible in terms of the old symbolic order it enters violently, it destroys our image of who we are for others and for ourselves. This is precisely what Lurie would have to learn, but this process of educating the former educator is far from what he has always imagined it to be – it involves neither imaginary identification nor learning skills. In fact, his educators become women and dogs.

The status of the image of the dog is ambiguous in the novel. A definite association between dogs and blacks persists through the first part of the novel, until the rape. On their first encounter Petrus calls himself half-jokingly "the dog-man" (64), Lurie projects this image onto the rapists ("*Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs*" (160)); he compares their sperm to dog's urine (199); but what is more interesting, when Lurie and Lucy have an argument on animal welfare, he brings up a point which may sound obscene in South Africa. Lucy, contesting her father's privileging "higher life" (of the "spirit"), claims that "there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with

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fur" (*Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke: The Book of Fresh Beginnings*, trans. David Young (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1994), 60).

[43] Rilke, *Poezje*, 184. In translation by A. S. Kline: "For beauty is nothing but / the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, / and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains/to destroy us" (6 March 2007 <http://www.tonykline.co.uk/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm>).

[44] In Kantian terminology "the beautiful" is the beauty of standards, while beauty in its destructive/terrible modality is called "the sublime."

animals. […] That's the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts." To which Lurie's answer is: "Yes, I agree, this is the only life there is. As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily just different" (74). What we have here is precisely a modality of discourse which has been used as an excuse for apartheid: although we all know that blacks are an inferior species and we despise them, yet for the sake of the Other let us claim that our desire to live apart from them is the sign of our respect for their alterity. As if this were not enough, Lurie's next sentence is: "So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution." Retribution from whom? Dogs and cats and cows and sheep? Or whales and elephants and gorillas and pandas? It is only too clear whose retribution Lurie fears and what kind of guilt he is trying to repress. Later, when out of boredom and to accept Lucy's suggestions he agrees to help in the animal clinic run by Bev Shaw, a friend of Lucy's, he does it only on condition that, as he jokingly puts it, he will do it "only as long as I don't have to become a better person" (77),[45] which, juxtaposed with his claims that his affair with the student *did* make him a better person,[46] goes some way towards explaining the nature of his enjoyment (exercise of authority aiming at extraction of pleasure in the guise of generosity). Yet it is Lurie who, towards the end of the novel, becomes a dog-man, helping Bev Shaw put the unwanted dogs down and making sure they have a decent "burial" in the nearby incinerator (when the hospital staff do it, they break the dogs' stiffened limbs with shovels because they get stuck in the trolleys and the corpses return, half-burned, from the flames). How can we account for such a change?

The first time he helps in the clinic Lurie has nothing but scorn for what Bev Shaw does: "Bev Shaw, not a veterinarian but a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo, trying, absurdly, to lighten the load of Africa's suffering beasts" (84). Yet, he cannot help being fascinated with a strange spectacle he sees there: "She kneels down again beside the goat, nuzzles his throat, stroking the throat upward with her own hair. The goat trembles but is still. […] She is whispering. 'What do you say my friend?' he hears her say. 'What do you

[45] Yet his first impulse was to resist: "It sounds like someone trying to make reparations for past misdeeds" (77).

[46] "Every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person" (70); or "I was enriched by the experience" (56).

say? Is it enough?' The goat stands stock still as if hypnotized. Bev Shaw continues to stroke him with her head. She seems to have lapsed into a trance of her own" (83). If it were not for such strange behaviour, she would be nicely accommodated by his symbolic order – he finds her discourse to be the other side of the PC discourse he has just heroically opposed: "to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat" (73). This coming together of Christianity and violence is by no means accidental – although he appears to contrast Christianity to violence, in fact (especially if we juxtapose here Christianity, PC and animal welfare), his point would be to show the identity of these attitudes with violence (the discourse of the master). What is claimed here, in the Nietzschean spirit, is that the guilt propagated by each of these discourses breeds violent resentiment and because of that it is pure life-denying mastery (in response to his suggestions Lucy asks incredulously: "You think Bev is part of the repressive apparatus?" (91)).

His position changes radically after the attack on the farm. To occupy himself, he helps at the animal clinic as often as he can and assists Bev Shaw in putting down dogs witnessing her strange trances when the animals seem to be hypnotised by her voice. But Lurie becomes more and more moved by what goes on in the clinic: "The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake" (142–43). This is the only time we see him crying. Moreover, as we have mentioned, he ends up operating the incinerator where the dead dogs are burned. Whence such overflowing of pity in such a narcissistic man?

Narcissism is precisely the key to the answer. Musing on his reasons for taking on the job of "dog undertaker" he explains them thus: "To lighten the burden of Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway? For himself then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing" (145–46). An imaginary identification again, this time with the image of a better world, which, as we have seen, always serves the interests of the narcissistic ego, if only to sharpen its recently faltering image of a man with finer sensibilities than others, but which is at the same time being a dissimulated

image of "the idea of the world in which black men do not rape white women and humiliate their fathers for pleasure." So what we ultimately witness here is Lurie's self-pity and his defence against the feeling of guilt – a symbolic enactment of saving the honour of dogs' corpses, in place of the symbolic corpses of himself (the symbolic death denied) and his daughter (the symbolic death assumed). The narcissistic plea of being a servant of Eros is turned into the no less narcissistic task of being *the* servant of dead dogs ("there is no one else stupid enough to do it" (146)) – the spitting image of the "election" (forced choice) of Lucy, yet on a humbler scale: "I was elected by gods," becomes "I was elected by dogs" ("History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein," muses Lurie on the day he appears on the farm (62)). One should not miss the irony of the indecently literary anagram (GOD-DOG): "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce."[47] None the less the modesty shows that he is learning.[48]

Lurie's education is complete only when he learns to abandon self-pity in the image of the dog, that is, when he identifies with the dog without it being an identification with the idea/image of a better world; in other words, when he accepts that he is (symbolically) dead. This is the lesson he finally learns from Lucy: the radically ethical act is to be able to give up one's past for the sake of the future. Not to abandon one's secondary identifications (teacher, intellectual, womaniser) for the sake of one and the ultimate identification (e.g. honour), but to give up this final identification too *for nothing*. Nothing in the sense of having no image – the monstrous future encroaches on the symbolic order of the chooser as horrifying nothingness which engulfs the understandable order of things. This is to understand there is no *agalma* in me, no treasure of something more in me than myself, which constitutes the kernel of my being and the

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[47] Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 15.

[48] This image of dogs as objects of narcissistic pity brings to mind another cliché of western discourse which is not present in the book, but whose absence may also be telling: the image of an "ethnic" or black as helpless victim. Dogs are objects of pity because they are unconscious victims of circumstances, and they are pitied only as long as they remain victims; the moment they "bite back" they become mad dogs and are considered beyond the pale of the law. In the same way, in the human rights liberal discourse, oppressed groups are pitied only as long as they stay oppressed: the moment they do something to counter the oppression – and this necessarily has to break the laws established by the oppressors – they become incarnations of monstrosity (terrorist, fundamentalist, etc.), which shows the narcissistic nature of the image of the victim: by making it into the object of pity I secretly enjoy my "liberal" status.

giving up of which will result in the ultimate humiliation, or, rather, understanding that the *agalma* is precisely nothing: a split, a gap in myself that allows me to "step over myself," to detach myself from him whom I used to be and start again from zero-point. More than this: to do it willingly. That is the final lesson his daughter teaches him: "Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity." "Like a dog," is Lurie's answer. "Yes, like a dog," echoes Lucy (205). Despite appearances there is no self-pity in this comparison if we take into consideration what Lucy means by it – life without privilege – and it is only Lurie, not "fully educated" yet, who inserts in it the context of the final sentence from Kafka's *The Trial*: " 'Like a dog!' he said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him."[49]

Yet the end of the book is surprisingly serene, suggesting that Lurie has finally learned his lesson, an old man sitting at the back of the animal clinic strumming a banjo, singing to himself, the very image of dispossession. Seeing Lucy in her garden visibly pregnant with the child of the rape, thinking a surprising thought of his approaching grandfatherhood, he sees nothing monstrous in it anymore. What is more, the image becomes a flash of beauty which takes his breath away ("even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away" (218)). "A new footing, a new start," he thinks, "Is it too late to educate the eye?" (218)

But this is just surprise at the disappearance of horror from his vision, the gesture of freely embracing it comes after that. The following Sunday, at the end of their *Lösung* session, as he calls putting down the dogs, he offers up a dog and his own attachment to him as his own choice of the inevitable: "One ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet. He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operation room" (219). In this gesture his narcissistic self-pity is overcome and we can interpret this as Lurie's first free, non-pathological act, an act foreign to his inclinations,[50] an act that completes his subjectification: he accomplishes something inevitable yet monstrous (betrayal of the attachment between the dog and

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[49] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Compact, 1994), 251.

[50] Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 23.

himself) by choosing it freely – and he calls it *love*: the highest good (love) coincides here with the highest evil (death).

What is the place of opera in this scheme? How does it relate to the events (if it relates at all)? We have already mentioned that, in a sense, Lurie finds the truth of the opera (song) in his "dying" scream of the subject's *aphanisis* (disappearance, fading), but there is another voice to which he is drawn, the voice with which Bev Shaw "enchants" the animals – although he at first derides her as a New Age priestess, he cannot help being fascinated with a voice that seems to work in the real, for animals react to it.

Lurie starts his operatic project, which he provisionally titles *Byron in Italy*, as another exercise in narcissism ("One wants to leave something behind" (63)): with Byron at the centre of the opera with his mistress, the Contessa Guiccioli, lushly orchestrated in the manner of Strauss (63). "Trapped in the Villa Guiccioli in the stifling heat of Ravenna, spied on by Teresa's jealous husband, the two would roam through the gloomy drawing-rooms singing of their baulked passion" (180). Byron full of doubt, Teresa passionately in love with him and an appropriate, slightly decadent atmosphere: "Byron's pet monkeys hanging languidly from the chandeliers and peacocks fussing back and forth among the ornate Neapolitan furniture" (181). All this is expressive of Lurie's Romantic identification with Byron, with the erotic and the elegiac (lament), not to mention the wish-fulfilling passionate love of a much younger woman (Teresa is 18 years old). Yet with his fall from grace in Cape Town, his project starts to change and it is only after the attack on the farm that it really starts to develop – at first the huge orchestra is gone and Byron is on the point of setting off for Greece, singing (quoting *The Aeneid*) "sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt," bored with Teresa whom he has found empty-headed: the elegiac is still present, although in a subdued form ("a very meagre accompaniment – violin, cello, oboe or maybe bassoon" (63)), but the tone of the erotic is transformed radically into something smacking of disgust. The narcissistic sublimation is still present but in a more sobering form. Then a crucial step is taken: Lurie abandons Byron (his point of identification) as his main protagonist and puts Teresa at the centre, but she is middle-aged now – all beauty gone, a plain, ordinary woman. So *Byron in Italy* becomes a work in which the eponymous hero, a womaniser and unacknowledged rapist ("Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape" (160)), is not present or rather is present only as "groans and sighs from Byron offstage" (214). There is a hole at the centre of the opera that Teresa

has to fill herself, to evoke his ghostly presence by singing his words back to him (183). So we are left with only one voice which expresses itself in a prolonged sigh, "Mio Byron," – "there is no action, no development, just a long halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into the empty air" (214). "Past honour" (209), she "sits staring out over the marshes towards the gates of hell, cradling the mandolin on which she accompanies herself in her lyric flights" (184). Teresa projects herself into the underworld to call Byron back from the dead to bring her old life to her, to make her immortal as his love ("*I was your Laura. Do you remember?*" (183)).

What we encounter here, in an ironic and reversed mode, is a return to two fundamental gestures of the proper father of the opera, Claudio Monteverdi. One is the motif of bringing the dead back from the underworld, which founded the genre as such, as presented in the work that is generally considered to be the first opera equal to its notion, that is, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607); the second, executed by Monteverdi the following year, takes place when, in *Arianna*, the lament is given over to the operatic protagonist who will rule the stage from that moment on, that is, the distraught woman, in this case Arianna who has been abandoned by Theseus (in *Orfeo* Euridice is a minor character). What we witness in this gesture is, as Mladen Dolar puts it, the appearance of the "Diva, the goddess of the opera whose status depends on being in total despair."[51]

But Teresa's despair is of a strangely narcissistic kind: what she presents as the longing of love ("*come to me, love me!*" (185)) is really the address to the Other for immortality (as Byron's "Laura") and thus she appropriately mixes the religious and the erotic, as has been the case throughout most history of music, in which music presented itself as the proper medium both to obtain the mercy of gods (as in the case of Orpheus, who in Monteverdi's opera fails his test and loses Euridice, but is, after the second lament, granted immortality by Apollo) and to soften the beloved's heart (Arianna).[52] Hence also its ambiguous status: in music the religious and the erotic may become conflated. And this is precisely what happens in *Byron in Italy*. Byron – not a god but nevertheless somebody able to grant symbolic immortality – is called as a lover to break through the gates of hell and appear as living dead among the living: a properly demonic or monstrous presence.

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[51] Mladen Dolar, "If Music Be the Food of Love," in: Žižek and Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*, 15.

[52] Dolar, "If Music Be the Food of Love," 10.

In opera, the interpenetration of love (Eros) with the demonic or death (Thanatos) comes to the fore only gradually. The first period of opera, from Monteverdi to Mozart, witnesses the ambiguous eroticised complaint/lament to the Other – the power of music in opera is presented as being so strong that the Other relents and grants mercy: we have the happy ending and the work of death in the power of music is forgotten. A new step is taken in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, where, in Kierkegaard's famous analysis, music becomes the incarnation of a self-destructive and all-devouring instinct (Don Giovanni, like Teresa, also disturbs the peace of the dead, although for different reasons). But it is in Wagner that Eros and Thanatos become completely conflated: in the famous Wagnerian *Liebestode* Isolde *dies of singing* her overwhelming love for Tristan, and her voice becomes the very medium of death.[53] What is more, the Wagnerian hero is precisely the hero born from the spirit of Byron – we may take the Flying Dutchman as the first and paradigmatic case – who in the past has committed some unspecified unspeakable crime and now has to wander, unable to find peace in death. The paradox here is that such a hero is monstrous not because he incarnates death, but just the opposite, because he incarnates immortality, the inability to die; in other words, what psychoanalysis calls the death drive, which, despite its name, is the very opposite of longing for annihilation.[54]

This is precisely what we find in Teresa: she is not able to live her everyday life peacefully, she longs to enjoy life to excess, to be seen as something more than "a woman past her prime, without prospects, living out her days in a dull provincial town" (182). And this is how she finds this strange extimate[55] object, the voice of death in herself, something in herself that is more than herself – something that only a lover and a great poet can speak of, can give voice to, as Byron used to do in his letters, the truth of which is contested by his former acquaintances. In order to appease this foreign object in herself she tries to give it a voice, imagining it as Byron's voice speaking to her from the realm of the dead – she ventriloquises his answers to fill the lack in her: "So faint, so faltering is the voice of Byron that Teresa has to sing his words back to him, helping him along breath by breath" (183). She wants to become Byron's Laura,

[53] Žižek, "I Do Not Order My Dreams," 106.

[54] Žižek, "I Do Not Order My Dreams," 106–107.

[55] *Extimité* (extimacy) is Lacan's neologism which problematises the difference between inside and outside because the subject is ex-centric for psychoanalysis. For instance, because the unconscious consists of signifiers it is an intersubjective structure – in this way, what is most *in*timate to me is *ex*terior to me, too.

Woman paradigmatic, whole and complete. She feels that without Byron (without her position as his Muse) she is nothing, "but to be all, to be 'the Woman all men are missing,' […] involves a psychotic stance. In this case Woman becomes "the Other of the Other," which is a psychotic position because it has no representation in the symbolic."[56] But this is precisely the position the operatic female voice attempts to take: "the voice beyond meaning, the object of fascination beyond content" by means of which the prima donna attempts to prove that Woman exists after all[57]: "*Come to me, mio Byron, love me!*" is the only message Teresa has, not really a message but one prolonged sigh that constitutes the whole of the opera. And Byron's voice is only a negative side of this voice-object trying to fascinate, which bears Teresa no message apart from the one that her voice is forever unable to accomplish the task assigned to it: "Leave me, leave me, leave me be!" (185).

Teresa finds this voice in her as a foreign body that splits her, so it functions precisely as the reverse of the metaphysical voice of "phonocentrism," as analysed by Derrida, where the voice grounds the self-presence and self-transparency of the subject:

> The voice is heard (understood) – that undoubtedly is what is called conscience – closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto-affection that necessarily has the form of time and which does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in "reality," any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self.[58]

Against this illusion of "hearing oneself speak" (*s'entendre parler*) Derrida champions writing, not as its actual practice but as a trace that always already muddles up the supposedly pure source of subject's self-affection, as a trace by which the source is always dislocated.

The voice can undoubtedly be approached in its narcissistic and auto-affective dimension and it has been treated like that throughout the history of metaphysics, as Derrida's analyses clearly show, but is that all there is to the voice? There is another counterhistory of the

[56] Eric Laurent, "Positions féminines de l'être," *La Cause Freudienne* 24 (1993), 108; paraphrased in: Renata Salecl, *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 1998), 27.

[57] Dolar, "If Music Be the Food of Love," 19.

[58] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 20.

voice that accompanies its treatment as the assurance of self-presence: a long tradition of attempts to discipline the voice, to make it properly signifying, serving the expression of the logos. From ancient China through Plato, Augustine and on, at least to the banning of the singing by castrati (treated as an exemplification of unnatural aristocratic decadence) at the time of the French Revolution, we witness tremendous efforts on the part of the authorities to discipline the voice so that it sticks to the "masculine" message it is supposed to impart (e.g. the word of God the Father) rather than to submerge itself in the "feminine" self-enjoyment beyond signification (sensual and therefore devilish).[59] But the paradox here is of course that the pure Word, devoid of the proper admixture of enjoyment, remains a dead letter; without it the message does not "speak," does not engage the subject; without it the Law remains devoid of its performative, interpellative dimension. In other words, the Law is a dead letter without hiding within itself the echo of the voice of the enjoying uncastrated father of *jouissance*: Teresa can enjoy her voice (enjoy immortality) only insofar as this enjoyment comes from addressing the Other for the symbolic immortality that she thinks she lacks, but paradoxically the more she sings, the more "nothing" she becomes, because the foreign object in her prevents her from becoming wholly sublimated into the signifier of her passion for Byron (the signifier: Byron's Muse). In other words, the more passionately she wants to become the signifier of immortality, the more passionately she sings – the more she enjoys and appears on the side of the voice, which prevents her apotheosis in signification. The more she tries to be the living proof of the truth of Byron's letters in which he addressed her as "*My love for ever*" (182), the more she tries to prove that "there is sexual relationship," that they should be included among the pantheon of paradigmatic lovers – the more it turns out that her *jouissance* is what Lacan called the *jouissance* of the Other, that she does not need a man to enjoy, that she is self-sufficient in it. Yet this *jouissance* of the Other is not pure unmediated self-affection, but takes place as the enjoyment in/of the code (of language, that is, of the Other's discourse), so its paradox is that it can cause fascination only in the third, somebody overhearing the address, not the one addressed (he would pay attention only the message addressed to him and therefore completely miss how the subject enjoys this message);

[59] This "counterhistory" is described in more detail in Mladen Dolar, "The Object Voice," in: *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). I lift the discussion of the voice in these paragraphs from him.

the one who is fascinated is not Byron therefore, but the listener who "overhears" the lament.

We encounter a similar configuration at the animal clinic where Bev Shaw "enchants" the animals with her voice – although Lurie disparages her as a New Age priestess, he cannot help but be fascinated by her voice, yet only when she addresses animals which seem to react to it (the voice seems to work in the real); when she speaks to him or to others, she is one of "dumpy little women with ugly voices" (79). What Lurie is fascinated, but at the same time traumatised, by (hence his violent reaction) is this self-sufficient *jouissance* which seems to show that certain women (like young children and wild cats, says Freud, ever since hated by feminists) have not given up some part of their libido. What Lurie seems to hear in her voice are the remains of uncastrated enjoyment in the real (beyond signification), which is unreachable for men, because they are completely submitted to the phallic (symbolic) order, and for whom therefore such *jouissance* is barred. What he perceives as Bev Shaw's *jouissance* introduces an enigma into Lurie's world, making his knowledge defective. And the degree of Lurie's fascination can be seen in his deeper and deeper involvement in the animal clinic, especially after the attack on the farm. This more and more fervent activity is accompanied by greater and greater involvement in the writing of his opera.

Lurie's opera may be conceived as his way of coming to terms with his new situation, but even more than that it is an attempt to come to terms with the traumatic dimension of the voice: on the one hand with the fascinating aspect of Bev Shaw's voice as traumatic feminine *jouissance*, but on the other hand, and more importantly, his own dying scream, the dimension of the voice that erases the subject and that actually covers the terrifying silence of the event which it is impossible to symbolise (even the unarticulated scream does not "describe" the event, it is only its echo, a negative sign of the impossibility). But are these two voices ultimately different?

The scream of the father is an echo of the "impossible" scene, of the impossible *jouissance*/violence that had to be excluded from the symbolic order for it to gain consistency, something that from the inside of he symbolic horizon is just an empty signifier, an excremental remainder into which the real of the transgressive founding act must turn.[60] On the other hand, the self-enjoying voice is the transgressive surplus of signification because it suggests the "impossible" enjoyment

[60] Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 147.

beyond the Law, the logos. Therefore, the two voices may be treated as the same voice in different modalities.[61] At first Lurie tries to heal its traumatic impact by projecting it onto the fantasmatic screen of his opera – he tries to keep his symbolic identifications of the past (honour, etc.) by staging the scene he was part of in the real and reworking it into heroic-elegiac terms: Byron sails toward his death singing "sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt." Then, suddenly, Byron (the Father) is dead and Teresa is given the words of Lucy as she appears to Lurie in a daydream within a strangely operatic setting: "her words – 'Come to me, save me!' – still echo in his ears. In the vision she stands, hands outstretched, wet hair combed back, in a field of white light" (103). Thus, the wound is no longer elegised into an abstract lament about human mortality. Identifying with Teresa he also identifies with his daughter – for him it is, however gentrified it may sound, an attempt to put himself in the position of a woman in total despair: "he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men [his daughter's rapists], inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160). But finally he has to confront the truth that *he does not have it in himself*, and that is why the writing of the opera will go on interminably. Lurie is trying to cover a distance that cannot be covered within the symbolic horizon of opera, which is also the symbolic horizon of his former life. Yet this failed sublimation is not really a failure after all: it is precisely the displacement of the traumatic dimension of the voice into his opera, the projecting of his interminable lament onto the fantasmatic screen, that enables him to exorcise his "masculine" fascination with it (which is strictly parallel to his ability to imaginatively become the rapists) and, in a "feminine" way, to assume the wound, to identify with it by freely embracing the actuality of subjective destitution.

[61] Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 155.

Slow Man (2005)

Slow Man is Coetzee's first novel in which references to the experience of modern South Africa are lacking. His earlier novels either took place there or, if they did not, attempted to grapple with problems whose South African origins were easy to trace, whether these related to the colonial experience or to political violence and its relation to writing (*Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*). In contrast, *Slow Man* is set in Australia, the country to which Coetzee moved from South Africa, a seemingly peaceful and opulent place far removed from the life and death choices which featured in Coetzee's previous novels. Although Australia too has its colonial and violent past – one aspect of it being the "usual" stealing of the land from the aboriginal inhabitants, the other its status as a penal colony – this past has been so thoroughly repressed from its social tissue that it never appears in the pages of the novel.

The plot starts rather dramatically with Paul Rayment, a sixty-year-old former photographer, flying through the air after he and his bicycle have been hit by a car driven by a reckless teenager. The outcome of the accident is concussion and the amputation of Rayment's right leg. Rayment could have been killed or paralysed, yet he escapes with this sorry but rather "affordable" loss – even his sexual functions are not impaired. His reaction to his new "reduced" body is, however, quite violent:

> They [doctors and nurses] talk about his future, they nag him to do the exercises that will prepare him for that future, they chivvy him out of bed; but to him there is no future, the door to the future has been closed and locked. If there were a way of putting an end to

> himself by some purely mental act he would put an end to himself at once, without further ado.[1]

Where does such disproportionate aggression come from and who is really its addressee? We do not have to wait too long to find out:

> He is convinced that he would put an end to himself if he could, right now. Yet at the same time that he thinks this thought he knows he will do no such thing. It is only the pain, and the dragging, sleepless nights in this hospital, this zone of humiliation with no place to hide from *the pitiless gaze of the young*, that make him wish for death. (13; emphasis added)

In his eyes he is no longer what he remains in his former lover's opinion, "the same handsome, healthy man you always were" (38). His self-image has received a devastating blow, made palpable as "the lumpish thing he will henceforth have to lug around with him" (14), which becomes an object of detestation and shame. He has lost half of his leg ("it was thought best to take the leg off cleanly above the knee, leaving a good length of bone for a prosthesis" (7)) but what is this other thing he lost with it, so that he speaks about his "crippled self" (17) and being "a lesser man" (113) henceforth?

He had an unexpected brush with death and what he considers to be the obscenity of his stump now becomes the persistent presence of his lost immortality – the image of the whole he has projected for himself, represented in social relations by his self-sufficiency ("*I don't want a prosthesis*. […] I would prefer to take care of myself" (10)) is gone for good: "The clock stands still yet the time does not. Even as he lies here he can feel time at work on him like a wasting of disease, like the quicklime they pour on corpses. Time is gnawing away at him, devouring one by one the cells that make him up. His cells are going out like lights" (11–12).

The blow to his narcissistic identification is overwhelming and hence the aggression directed at first at the young and their "universal plot": "The nurses are good, they are kind and cheery, but beneath their brisk efficiency he can detect […] a final indifference to their [his and another aged patient's in the room] fate. […] *So young and yet so heartless!* he cries to himself" (12). The accusation, however, is obviously misdirected, as the nurses cannot be rightfully accused of giving Rayment care instead of love, and this is precise-

[1] J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (New York: Viking, 2005), 12–13; further references in the body of the text.

ly what he demands from them, pathetically blaming "this lumpish thing" for the lack of it ("It is as though at some unconscious level these young people who have been assigned to care for them know they have nothing to give to the tribe and therefore do not count" (12)).

Who is therefore the rightful addressee of the aggression that he directs towards the youthful hospital personnel? The answer can be made out most clearly at the significant moment when Rayment's aggression is at its most violent and blind: when he wants to shout (he cannot really because of anaesthetics): "Who did this to me?" (11). This, of course, can be answered by a series of metonymic substitutions: Dr Hansen, who operated, Wayne Blight, who ran into him, and ultimately God, whose instrument Wayne Blight was. And although Rayment speaks about the teenager as God's angel half-jokingly, or rather sarcastically (54), it is precisely the fantasmatic gaze of God that Rayment projects into the young ("[the old] have nothing to give to the tribe and therefore do not count") and this is where his shame comes from: from imagining his current appearance in the gaze of the Other as worthless.

It is only by taking this gaze into consideration that we can explain the violent degradation of his self-image that Rayment experiences. It is not only that he sees no future for him and speaks about his crippled self (not crippled body); his self-deprecation goes much further: "By the sign of this cut let a new life commence. If you have hitherto been a man, with a man's life, may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog's life. That is what the voice says, the voice out of the dark cloud" (26). His life will be the life of the dog, a degraded life, because "his limbs have been unstrung and now his spirit is unstrung too" (27). His body might have toppled "like a wooden puppet" (27) on Magill Road, where the accident took place, but what is much more important he is no longer able to see in the Other's gaze his narcissistically complete image of himself – he will lug his stump around with him as a palpable proof of his incompleteness and dependence.

What else does the voice out of the dark cloud say? It keeps repeating over and over again the same thing that Rayment read in the pitiless gaze of the young: "If none is left who will pronounce judgement on such a life, if the Great Judge of All has given up judging and withdrawn to pare his nails,[2] then he will pronounce

[2] This Joyceian reference to a writer as the gaze of God will materialise later as Elizabeth Costello, not surprisingly the author of the novel *The House on Eccles Street*.

it himself: *A wasted chance*. […] What could be more selfish, more miserly – this in specific is what gnaws at him – than dying childless, terminating the line, subtracting oneself from the great work of generation? Worse than miserly, in fact: unnatural" (20). But what he wants and what he mourns not having is not just a child who could confirm his role in the "work of generation." What he is after is something much more specific: "It would be nice to have a daughter, girls have an appeal of their own, but the son he does not have is the one he truly misses. […] But it is not a baby he wants. What he wants is a son, a proper son and heir, a younger, better version of himself" (44–45). Therefore, what we witness has nothing to do with "natural" or "unnatural" ways of conducting oneself in the society – by imagining his unborn son, he yet again returns to his obsessive imaginary identification: the son is just another incarnation of Rayment's image of completeness, and therefore immortality – even if I become "truncated," my son, who in a way is myself too, makes up for my deficiency and in his better image I can take refuge from the degradation of my wholeness. With a grown up son I can afford to lose a leg because (ideally) he will say: "*You have done your duty, taken care of me, now it is my turn. I will take care of you*" (45). And since in his (potentially loving) image I will be able to recognise myself as whole (even a better version of myself), his gaze will not (unlike the hospital staff's imaginary gaze) reflect my incompleteness to me. In other words, my son would be *the natural prosthesis* to me, the image able to repair my truncated image of myself, while a mechanical ("unnatural") prosthesis seems only to be a mocking incarnation of the imaginary "pitiless gaze of the young" ("There was an old man with one leg / Who stood with his hat out to beg. And so forth" (99)). When Rayment is offered a rationale for wearing the artificial limb he counters it with a characteristic displacement of the gaze from the outside (simulation of wholeness by wearing a prosthesis is unnatural) to the inside (what is natural, therefore not even gaze but feeling): "I don't want to look natural […] I prefer to feel natural," says he (59).

Hence Rayment's otherwise inexplicable obstinacy in refusing orthopaedic prosthesis. What is more, he seems to treat this attitude of his, which is incomprehensible to the medical personnel, as a kind of heroic action consisting in contesting the role assigned to him by their pitiless gaze. It is a continuation of his refusal to participate in the Other's "games" in the hospital: "He knows it is expected of him *now that he is improving* to experience gross desires toward these young women [nurses]. […] Being a lecherous old goat is part of the

game, a game he is declining to play" (14). Another of his "surprising" decisions is also taken for similar reasons: "I have no intention of suing [...]. Too many openings for comedy. *I want my leg back, failing which*..." (15). Yet the ending of this statement adds a perverse twist to this "heroic" attitude: "I leave that side of things to the insurance people." There is the intention of suing but somebody else will do what is needed, sparing Rayment the need to appear within the space of the gaze that he feels must ridicule him. What we find here is a similar logic to the one that can be discerned in Rayment's refusal to accept a prosthesis. The very structure of the refusal is quite revealing: "*I don't want a prosthesis*. [...] I would prefer to take care of myself" (10). Leaving aside the ruminations "taking care of oneself" leads Rayment into (in the train of thoughts it inaugurates, the phrase becomes an euphemism for suicide), it is precisely a prosthesis which would allow him to become a "biped" again and take care of himself without external help (it is said that he will even be able to ride his bicycle again), so refusing it is not a heroic gesture – in fact, something exactly the opposite: it is being helpless which gives a certain "grandeur" to pronouncements like the following:

> Whatever love he might once have had for his body is long gone. He has no interest in fixing it up, returning to some ideal efficiency. The man he used to be is just a memory, and a memory fading fast. He still has a sense of being a soul with an undiminished soul-life; as for the rest of him, it is just a sack of blood and bones that he is forced to carry around. (32)

Such "heroic" passages abound in the book and one cannot help but invoke here the truth of the melancholic self for whom "the self-tormenting [...] is without doubt enjoyable."[3] Although the mechanism of melancholic displacement described by Freud is supposed to refer to interpersonal relations (the lost object of love being the other), it nevertheless seems to fit Rayment's relation to his own image perfectly: "If the love for the object [self-image] – a love that cannot be given up though the object itself is given up ['spoiled' in the accident] – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object [the new, 'truncated' body], abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering."[4]

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[3] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in: *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), 260.

[4] Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 260.

In order to accept a prosthesis Rayment would first have to work out a "prosthetic" ego for himself, taking as his cue his own derisive phrase about the order of things he has fallen into: "thesis, antithesis, then prosthesis" (62). In other words, his life is becoming a wasted chance not, as he claims, because of the lack of offspring which would just reproduce for him the same but rejuvenated image of himself ("a younger, better version of himself"), but because of his fixation on his own perfect and, because of it, "stalled" image – perfection, as is well known, cannot develop. The accident is an opportunity to shake up this identification, especially because what becomes broken is the real of his body, and it is precisely *this* chance which is being wasted – instead of the triad of the narcissistic ego (thesis), the loss of the ego because of the amputation (antithesis), and a new ego (a new identification which is "better" because it introduces a new constellation, no longer a better version of the same), everything Rayment does points to his regression to the former narcissistic ego in an attempt to save it in any possible "diminished" form (from a man's life to a dog's life).[5]

In spite of all the rhetorical pronouncements about his former life as a chapter closed for good ("That part of my life is over" (15)), the accident has done nothing to his image of himself, which he freely admits: "But escaping death ought to have shaken him up, opened windows inside him, renewed his sense of the preciousness of life. It has done nothing of this sort. He is trapped with the same old self as before, only greyer and drearier" (54).[6] And although he calls himself "an after-man" (34) and heaps all kinds of abuse and scorn on his new body and life, he quickly finds a surprising but also very telling image to identify with from now on. In the context already mentioned, where he contrasts feeling natural with looking natural, Rayment muses:

> Does the Venus of Milo feel natural? Despite having no arms the Venus of Milo is held up as an ideal of feminine beauty. Once she had arms, the story goes, then her arms were broken off; their loss only

[5] Even Rayment himself admits to this, although he does not fully grasp the true meaning the words for his position: "I may be labile, but being labile is not an aberration. We should all be more labile, all of us. This is my new, revised opinion. We should shake ourselves more often" (210).

[6] The real shaking up would have had nothing to do with the renewed preciousness of life, if it had happened – what took place actually *did* something of that sort: it evoked the preciousness of living in the old image of wholeness, hence the melodramatic: "If you have hitherto been a man, with a man's life, may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog's life."

> makes her beauty more poignant. Yet if it were discovered tomorrow that the Venus was in fact modelled on an amputee, she would be removed at once to a basement store. Why? Why can the fragmentary image of a woman be admired but not the image of a fragmentary woman, no matter how neatly sewn up the stumps? (59)

What takes place here is more than just a wry commentary on his condition – in the image of the Venus of Milo he finds an image in which a truncated body is miraculously connected to the image of ultimate beauty. What he suddenly realises is that only an imaginary operation is required for his treasure to be returned back to him: if it is possible to turn the fragmentary image of a woman into the image of a fragmentary woman without altering the real object itself (the damaged sculpture), the reverse transformation should also be in principle possible: turning the image of a fragmentary man into the fragmentary image of a man – his disgusting reflection can be made whole again (become perfect and immortal) by a purely imaginary effort. The problem, however, is that he cannot accomplish it on his own – as the Venus of Milo becomes the image of perfect beauty because it is recognised as such by the Other, Rayment's miraculous transformation into the whole man again would also have to be certified by the Other's gaze. In other words, Rayment finally subscribes to the scenario he purported to spurn at the outset because of "too many openings for comedy." He desperately attempts to have his "leg" (that which was extracted from him) back on the imaginary level: in order to achieve that he has to make somebody create the image of this "leg" for him – make somebody produce for him the image of himself as whole (beautiful, perfect).

He desperately applies this programme when a suitable occasion presents itself. His former friends and lovers, like Margaret McCord, are out of the question since they knew him when his body was "whole" and therefore will always, while comparing his present state with his "old self," perceive him as "broken" and deficient even if they do not mind his present image: "He does not care to become the object of any woman's sexual charity, however good-natured. Nor does he care to expose to the gaze of an outsider, even if she is a friend from the old days, even if she does claim to find amputees romantic, this unlovely new body of his, that is to say, not only the hectically curtailed thigh but the flaccid muscles and the obscene little paunch that has ballooned on his abdomen" (38). His first day nurse, Sheena, is of no use either, because of her "indecency": she stares unashamedly at the sign of his reduction and, what is more,

makes (mild) jokes about his private parts (which seem to bear metonymic relation to his stump, being for him his most obscene part now[7]), which amplifies Rayment's feeling of deficiency and leads to his complaints that he is being treated like a child (or an idiot, he thinks, therefore a "reduced" man) and result in depression: "The gloom seems to have settled in, to be part of the climate" (25).

All of this changes dramatically when Marijana Jokić, a Croatian immigrant, takes over after Sheena: "at once all gloom is gone, all dark clouds" (72). With her, Rayment has a feeling that his manly wholeness may be returned to him again: "He does what he can to maintain the decencies, and Marijana backs him. […] In all of this he is trying to remain a man, albeit a diminished man; and it could not be clearer that Marijana understands and sympathises" (32). What with Sheena was a castrating operation of direct "pitiless" gazes, with Marijana turns into a veritable hall of mirrors in which the imaginary presence of the obscene Thing, "*le jambon*" (29), the "sightless deep-water fish" (28) becomes almost refined out of existence in the exchange: "When nakedness cannot be helped, he averts his eyes, so that she will see he does not see her seeing him" (32). The consequences are predictable: Rayment seizes the occasion and falls head over heels in love with this "decent woman, […] *decent through and through*" (33). Yet his infatuation suspiciously follows the line of the least resistance: in this imaginary relation with Marijana the fantasmatic frame is set up through which he gazes at his own image again, the image the content of which we have already seen: "Marijana would have set him right, had he only met her in time, Marijana from Catholic Croatia. […] A woman built for motherhood. Marijana would have helped him out of childlessness. Marijana could mother six, ten, twelve and still have love left over, mother-love" (34).

In the times when Rayment's narcissism was "natural," when his body was whole, he admits to loving only narcissistic women ("Curious that he has fallen for Marijana, seeing that in the past he fell always for women who loved themselves" (163)). Now, however, he needs somebody who will return to him his lost imaginary substance – and what can be more "substantial" than the "ethnic" fullness Marijana represents to Rayment in her many imaginary incarnations: in her exotic Balkan habits ("she smokes in an unreconstructed old-European way" (31), she wears "not a nurse's cap but a head-scarf, like any good Balkan housewife" (40), her ferocious Balkan passion ("An

[7] Of course, as we have already noted, the loss of the leg also performs a "castration" on his self-image, making it deficient.

intimate relationship with a row every now and again, Balkan style, to add a dash of spice: accusations, recriminations, plates smashed, doors slammed. Followed by remorse and tears, followed by heated lovemaking" (253)), and especially, of course, as the mother of three children (a large family also has a dash of exoticism in the "First" World), including the idealised sixteen-year-old son Drago ("a name from folk-epic," thinks Rayment (69)).

If a substantial woman like this could yield to his advances (no reservations this time about becoming "the object of any woman's sexual charity": "Does he want to become her lover too? Yes, he does, in a sense, fervently" (72)), he would become the male counterpart of the Venus of Milo: in spite of his real deficiency Marijana would fill his lack with her overabundant substance (reflect to him his old idealised image) and so he would become whole once again in the gaze of the Other. Therefore, it is his own image of beauty ("natural" substantial wholeness) that Rayment loves in Marijana and it is his own *deluded* image that he projects onto her, finding in her what nobody else has yet seen: "The gaze of love is not deluded. Love sees what is best in the beloved, even when what is best in the beloved finds it hard to emerge into the light. Who is Marijana? A nurse from Dubrovnik with a short waist and yellow teeth and not bad legs. Who except he, with the gaze of love, sees the shy, sloe-eyed gazelle hiding within?" (161–62). Marijana indeed is a nurse with short waist and yellow teeth and her being a gazelle in Rayment's "gaze of love" is a fantasmatic projection, based on the above-mentioned "Balkan" clichés (phoney-East-European-exotic), and such projection is anything but disinterested. Therefore, the reverse of Rayment's statement that the gaze of love is not deluded is the case here: the image of beauty Rayment evokes has nothing to do with Marijana because, being based on pure prejudice ("Balkan marriage," etc.), it is an image which is his sheer fabrication, so in loving it Rayment can finally *fall in love with himself again*.

Moreover, what Rayment takes to be his loving insight into Marijana as a sloe-eyed gazelle – something which he presents as incontrovertible proof of the truth of his love – is precisely what makes him blind to Marijana's real situation, which is surprisingly close to his own. The paradox here is that what he perceives as the grace of her overabundant ethnic substance ("Marijana from Catholic Croatia" and everything exotic it implies) either never existed[8] or, if it in some

[8] "But Marijana is cultured person. Diploma in restoration – she tell you that? No restoration work in Australia, but still. In Munno Para [working class neighbourhood in which the Jokićs live], who she can talk to?" says her husband Miroslav (148).

way did, it was excised by her leaving her Yugoslav existence and making herself over into a nurse in Bielefeld.[9] Therefore, Marijana Jokić is also an amputee: an important part of her "substance" had been removed from her life – one can venture that the result of abandoning a semi-artistic profession and moving to another hemisphere to "start zero" (49) as somebody akin to a manual labourer in completely unknown cultural circumstances may be more painful "morally" than the real amputation of a leg. In other words, Marijana has been through Rayment's predicament of the loss of the ego and survived without Rayment's moaning and apocalyptic scenarios, in spite of the fact that it is *her* new life which may be treated as reduced, as a dog's life in comparison with her life in Dubrovnik: "You think you know how it is to be nurse, Mr Rayment? Every day I nurse old ladies, old men, clean them, clean their dirt, I don't need to say it, change sheets, change clothes. Always I am hearing *Do this, do that, bring this, bring that, not feeling good, bring pills, bring glass of water, bring cup of tea, bring blanket, take off blanket, open window, close window, don't like this, don't like that*. I come home tired in my bone, telephone rings, any time, mornings, nights: *Is emergency, can you come…*" (212). And when Rayment is confronted with this image, which obviously does not fit into his scenario at all, his reaction to it is characteristically obscene: knowing full well that being a nurse has nothing to do with calling in her case, he nevertheless offers to her in return another of his delusive imaginary substances: "I always thought […] that nursing was a vocation. I thought that was what set it apart, what justified the long hours and the poor pay and the ingratitude and the indignities too, such as those you mentioned: that you were following the calling. Well, when a nurse is called, a proper nurse, she doesn't ask questions, she comes" (213).[10] This may sound strange in the mouth of a person whose calling seems to be to make a nuisance of himself wherever he happens to be (every time and with everybody it is "a game he is declining to play"), but there is a certain logic to this attitude – since, as we have tried to show, the perfect image he perceives as Marijana's is actually his own image as it should be reflected in the eye of the Other (the positions on both sides of

[9] It is said that "she left the land of her birth twelve years ago" (27), which would indicate 1988, that is, before the ethnic atrocities that took place in the former Yugoslavia.

[10] As we all know, this is the position of authority itself: in all types of state services invoking the calling is a rationale resorted to when the matter of underpayment arises (nurses, teachers, etc.). What Rayment is performing here is well expressed by the usage of double entendre that Marijana should *come* if she is called for.

the mirror are reversible); every time the image becomes undone at its seams Rayment identifies with the Other, and chastises others (hospital personnel, Marijana, later Drago) with the image of beauty (wholeness, substance) they have not risen up to, while it is precisely he himself who behaves in a questionable way (demanding love from hospital personnel, etc.). In this way the Other seems to justify his perverse behaviour as rightful, which can be clearly seen in the matter concerning Drago's education.

As often happens, Drago, the only son, is his mother's weak spot and therefore the easiest way to get to her. Rayment must place him in the same ethnic/heroic framework ("a name from folk-epic. *The Ballad of Drago Jokić*") he has placed his mother in ("Marijana from Catholic Croatia. […] Marijana could mother six, ten, twelve and still have love left over, mother-love"). At first, this seems to be a counterproductive effort, because such "ethnicity" would actually exclude Rayment from the picture as a figure belonging to a different "post-ethnic" and "post-religious" discourse. Yet it is precisely by means of the heroic narrative that he is able to insinuate himself into the Jokićs' ballad: "No ordinary boy, this one! The envy of gods he must be. […] No wonder his mother is fearful" (70). Taking into consideration Rayment's earlier obscenely "heroic" posturing, what comes next is predictable: "But Drago above all he wants to save. Between Drago and the lightning-bolt of the envious gods he is ready to interpose himself, bare his own breast" (73).

And soon enough the time comes when the heroic discourse has to be translated into a less lofty one to become effective: Drago can be saved from his fate (recklessly driving a motorcycle and hanging out with "unsuitable" friends) by being sent to a boarding school of his choice to prepare for military service, so Rayment, as a preface to the baring of his feelings to Marijana, devises a plan to help financially with his education, which the Jokićs would otherwise not be able to afford. At this moment a typical "Raymentian" gesture appears: in order to neutralise the traces of perversity in this scenario he presents it as his rising up to the perfect image in the gaze of the Other (something Marijana as a nurse is accused of failing to perform): "*Would Jesus approve?* That is the question I put to myself nowadays, continually. That is the standard I try to meet. […] Marijana and her children – I want to bless them and make them thrive" (156).

The truth of this statement, however, comes to the surface when the real treasure, another aspect of his self-image, becomes endangered, that is, the collection of historic Australian photographs ("his collection may be the best in the country, even in the world" (48)),

which are to be bequeathed to the State Library in Adelaide and bear Rayment's name. When Drago borrows or misplaces a couple of Rayment's favourite "original" photographs by Fauchery, his tragically heroic image is immediately degraded to a much lower genre: "Is that who they are then? […] Gypsies? What else of mine have they stolen, these Croatian gypsies?" (220).

It is interesting that the photographs, which represent gold-diggers and their families in Australia from the beginning of the nineteenth century, were borrowed by Drago for clearly "prosthetic" purposes. He doctors them by means of a computer program in order to insert into them faces from his own family photographs. In this way his paternal grandfather becomes one of the diggers, for instance. In other words, Drago is constructing for himself a kind of mock-heroic history (or a *Ballad of Drago Jokić*!) as a part of the history of Australia – the national past that was taken away from him before he could claim it (he left Yugoslavia at the age of four) is being imaginarily recreated in his new country, even if in a humorous fashion. In other words, the boy overcomes his amputation by making photographs obey *narrative* logic, by producing a mutation of the fetish of "historic truth," by doing what his former compatriots were not able to do, that is, letting go of his "ethnic" identification and producing another one in its place.

This flies in the face of Rayment's obsessive fixation: "he tends to trust pictures more than he trusts words. Not because pictures cannot lie but because, once they leave the darkroom, they are fixed, immutable. Whereas stories […] seem to change shape all the time" (64). In this sense, Rayment's relation to his collection does not seem to be so different from his relation to his self-image: it may not be true in the absolute sense, but there is a different kind of truth which one can ascribe to it and that is immutability. Photographs are important to him because they turn what is most evanescent and insubstantial (light, images) into *substance*: "The camera, with its power of taking light and turning it into substance, has always seemed to him more a metaphysical than a mechanical device. His […] greatest pleasure was always in darkroom work. As the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid […] he would sometimes experience a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation" (65). And as we know from elsewhere, God created the world and saw that it was good.

Rayment claims that he lost interest in photography when he found out "that to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash

through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue. He gave up recording the world in photographs then, and transferred his energies to saving the past" (65). But what kind of past is recorded this way? A past that has no meaning whatsoever since images, unlike memory (narrative), do not fix meaning – taken out of the context they become only objects of fascination.[11] It is the past turned into beautiful images, since it can be said that all photographs, unlike paintings or literature, become more beautiful with age. In this way, even a bad photograph will acquire its specific aura if only we wait long enough.[12] In other words, photography transforms the world in the object of aesthetic contemplation which make the auratic object out of the world of "that poverty and that grinding labour on hollow stomachs" (52) which Rayment's favourite photographs represent.

This world enters his life in non-aestheticised form, when Marijana's outburst about her grinding labour breaks down his image of her (his own mirror image on which his imaginary relation is based) because it introduces *antagonism* between them. But, as we noted, Rayment quickly takes control of the situation by assuming the position of the Other and accusing her of breaking the aesthetic distance, of failing to rise up to the *insubstantial* image of the ideal nurse and of introducing such unpleasantly crude material considerations as coming home "tired in my bone." In other words, he blames her for refusing to be a "moving (coming?) picture" exploited for his imaginary and aesthetic satisfaction as a nurse able to commune with her patient.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this aesthetic disposition is precisely what Marijana will not admit, and she refuses to accept the auratic dimension of photography: "You make photograph, or this man, how you say, Fauchery, make photograph, then you make prints, one two three four five, and these prints all original, five times original, ten times original, hundred times original, no copies?" (245). For Rayment these photographs are "substantial" objects of no other but aesthetic value (nothing disinterested in it, however: "You come here, you say to Drago he must find originals. For what? So you can die and give originals to library? So you can be famous? (246)), while for Drago it is the very meaning which can be wrestled out of them which is of importance: within a proper context (on his website) the doctored images will speak their version of Australian

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[11] John Berger, "Uses of Photography," in: *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 55.

[12] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 141.

history taking place under the eyes of Rayment, the same grinding labour that he prefers to ignore while he sees it, but wants to save in the nineteenth-century images as if they were just the images of a long forgotten and non-existent, overcome past.

So, what Rayment cannot stomach is something altogether different from what he claims in the following statement: "It is the desecration that he feels most of all: the dead made fun of by a couple of cocky, irreverent youths" (218). Yet, it is precisely by means of what he calls "desecration" that fidelity is kept to the dead, that is, by keeping their predicament on display, making their grinding immigrant labour meaningful within the historical constellation of the year 2000, while Rayment's "saving the past" is the ultimate betrayal since its driving force is "fidelity to the photographs themselves, the photographic prints, most of them last survivors, unique" (65). The fidelity described by Rayment, if it is fidelity at all, is the aesthetic fidelity to the photographer and therefore to the meaningless objects of fascination photographs made these people into, and ultimately to the aesthetic order which makes human suffering into an object of aesthetic judgement.

In Rayment's aforementioned statement we finally come full circle to the original scene in the hospital: it is claimed that desecration of the photographs is felt so acutely because it is performed by the pitiless (because irreverent) gaze of the young. But the object of ridicule here is obviously not the dead diggers but as usual the very image of Rayment in which he keeps recognising himself: "The state Library, a mob of worthy old gents and ladies fanning themselves against the heat, some boring bigwig or other unveiling the Rayment Bequest, and – hello, hello! – who is this at the centre of the *pièce de résistance* of the collection but one of the Jokić clan from Croatia!" (220).

So, in the final analysis, there is some poetic justice in Rayment's momentary loss of aestheticising distance (rather than spinning *The Ballad of Drago Jokić*, it is: "What else of mine have they stolen, these Croatian gypsies?"). He becomes so infuriated because in the whole affair his own weapon is turned against him: in order to make somebody ridiculous you also have to reduce him to a funny picture while distancing yourself from him in the sense of disregarding the painful effects your action will induce in your object. So the comment Costello adds to Rayment's accusation when he pronounces the Jokićs to be gypsies can just as well be directed back to Rayment as, in a sense, it sums up his aesthetic attitude: "[Rayment is] not [a] particularly bad [Australian], just a little callous, a little rough on the heart" (220).

We have tried to show that what Rayment loves in Marijana is simply the possibility of his own restored image being returned to him and this knowledge is brought to him with the appearance on his doorstep of Elizabeth Costello, supposedly a well-known Australian writer. She appears just after he announces his feelings to Marijana and the first thing she offers him is a completely different image of love: "Forget about Mrs Jokić and your fixation on her. Cast your mind back. Do you remember the last time you visited the osteopathy department at the hospital? Do you remember the woman in the lift with the dark glasses? In the company of an older woman? Of course you remember. She made an impression on you" (95–96). At first sight, however, the proposition Costello makes seems to be an attempt to involve Rayment into some kind of tasteless joke:

> Let me fill you in on the woman with the dark glasses. She is, alas, blind. She lost her sight a year ago, as the result of a malignancy, a tumour. Lost one whole eye, surgically excised, and the use of the other too. Before the calamity she was beautiful, or at least highly attractive; today, alas, she is unsightly in the way that all blind people are unsightly. One prefers not to look on her face. Or rather, one finds oneself staring and then withdraws one's gaze, repelled. […] Being blind is worse than she was warned it would be, worse than she had ever imagined. She is in despair. In a matter of months she has become the object of horror. She cannot bear being in the open, where she can be looked at. She wants to hide herself. She wants to die. And at the same time – she cannot help herself – she is full of unhappy lust. She is in the summer of her womanly life; she moans aloud with lust, day after day, like a cow or a sow in heat. (96)

And she adds: "I say to you: Why not see what you can achieve together, you and Marianna, she blind, you halt?" (97).

It is not only that she counters his self-pity by confronting him with what he tries to avoid at all costs, that is, with the comic side of his affliction ("Losing a leg is not a tragedy. On the contrary, losing a leg is comic. Losing any part of the body that sticks out is comic. Otherwise we would not have so many jokes on the subject" (99)), but she wants to involve him in a positively preposterous narrative of the halt leading the blind, and on top of that the blind, who has the same name as the Croatian object of his passion, is dying to provide him precisely with what Marijana refuses. Yet, perhaps there is more in this scenario than just a joke, notwithstanding the sick humour of the situation.

If we look closer at it, Marianna may be the only chance that Rayment has of curing himself of *his* affliction which is primarily neither the lost leg nor misplaced passion (an old man engaging his heart unsuitably is also a comedy matter, as Costello duly reminds Rayment (199)) but his fixation with the gaze of the Other. This comes out clearly in the scene of what he characteristically calls Australian Gothic (107), that is, a scene in which Marianna and Rayment meet and make love: " 'If you would sing, that would be best of all,' he says. 'We are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we are not being watched.' […] But in a certain sense they are being watched, he is sure of that, on the back of his neck he can feel it" (103). And he behaves accordingly, in his usual way, acting his ridiculous role of a sensible and restrained gentleman ("There is no need […] for us to adhere to any script. No need to do anything we do not wish. We are free agents" (105)), while his thoughts spit derision: "Matilda and her bloke, worn down by a lifetime of waltzing, parts of their bodies falling off or falling out, face the photographer one last time" (107).

The old story of imaginary fixation – "Beauty without the sight of beauty [Rayment is blindfolded] is not yet, to him, imaginable" (107–108) – repeats itself over again. But, as we have noted, in his case the image of beauty is precisely the image of *blindness*, that is, bad faith consisting in projecting his own "repaired image" on the object of his passion. Here, however, such a trick is impossible as Marianna is *literally* blind – hers is a body beyond any imaginary repair. In other words, as was the case with his *jambon* in the beginning, in the relationship with Marianna he would be constantly confronted with her returning to him his own "broken" image and it is precisely for this reason that only falling in love with her would cure him of his imaginary fixation with himself. Yet, in order to do this, he would have to become ridiculous, that is, become *a dog*: "He is not sure he has ever liked passion, or approved of it. Passion: a foreign territory; a comical but unavoidable affliction like mumps, that one hopes to undergo while still young, in one of its milder, less ruinous varieties, so as not to catch it more seriously later on. Dogs in the grip of passion coupling, hapless grins on their faces, their tongues hanging out" (45–46). In other words, rather than shaping the "serious" images of his narcissistic love for the gaze of the Other which are all ultimately but unintentionally comic ("Between Drago and the lightning-bolt of the envious gods he is ready to interpose himself, bare his own breast," "Marijana and her children – I want to bless them and make them thrive," etc.), rather than asking "*Would Jesus* [the Other] *approve?*" he would have to fall in love "blindly,"

that is, *completely disregarding the possibility of appearing comic to the Other and its pitiless gaze*. The moment he was able to make love to Marianna without shame, he would also have to admit that they are alone and that *the pitiless gaze of the Other was his own*.

The pitiless gaze appears in the space of the aesthetic distance that constitutes the position from which he judges himself and others and which is the ultimate place where he finds the true substance of his enjoyment: even if he finds his self-image lacking ("may you henceforth be a dog, with a dog's life"), he enjoys the possibility of finding his self-image lacking as this very possibility implies the existence of another "higher" judging faculty of the self and therefore his self paradoxically finds itself to be better than itself.[13] In other words, as his gaze had aestheticised the suffering of others (e.g. diggers), so his own suffering is distilled into an aesthetic pleasure of his superego. Therefore, having found him incurable, Marianna leaves him to his own devices, accepting payment as a good psychoanalyst in order to annihilate the symbolic debt of responsibility that might have appeared in their relationship, and she does it quite successfully: she disappears completely from the last two thirds of the book.

Thus, being stuck with his narcissistic image, Rayment cannot change: the only thing that he does do up to the last pages of the novel is confess his love to Marijana. And this is precisely the reason Costello appears: because he cannot develop as *a character of the novel*. We have already mentioned that Costello introduces herself as an Australian writer, but we also know that she is a protagonist of Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, a collection which consists mostly of hybrid forms somewhere between short stories and essays, and who often seems to hold opinions close to those of the author. As we also have noted, Costello materialises on Rayment's doorstep just after his momentous confession to Marijana, asks him to give her his hand and comments on what she has just done: "wanting to explore for myself what kind of being you are. Wanting to be sure […] that our two bodies would not just pass through each other. Naïve, of course. We are not ghosts, either of us – why should I have thought so?" (81). What is more, she starts to recite to the dumbfounded Rayment the book we are reading, *Slow Man*, from the first sentence on. But her initial request to give her a hand also bears a figurative message – "Push!" she urges him, "Push the mortal envelope" (83).

A display of the mechanics of (Coetzee's?) authorial technique follows: "You came to me. […] In certain respects I am not in command

[13] Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 153.

of what comes to me" (81), she claims and what came with him were also the Jokićs; but there is a catch: "Do you think you are the only man who in the autumn of his years […] thinks he has found what he has never known heretofore, true love? Two a penny, Mr Rayment, stories like that are two a penny. You will have to make a stronger case for yourself" (82). Hence the appeal for pushing, as to a woman in labour. But how is a character in the novel supposed to invent himself? Isn't that precisely the task of the author? What does it mean that neither Rayment nor Costello are ghosts?

"You occurred to me – a man with a bad leg and no future and unsuitable passion. That was where it started. Where we go from here I have no idea" (85). The character appears out of nowhere and his presence just *insists*. In a sense, he is beyond the author's volition as the latter has to follow this insistence blindly and see what will become of it: "You may not see the point of it, Mr Rayment, the pursuit of intuitions, but this is what I do. This is how I have built my life: by following up intuitions, including those I cannot at first make sense of. Above all those I cannot make sense of" (85). None the less, in order to remind us of the place of the author, Costello has some God-like lines: "Come back with me […] to my house in Carlton. You will like it, it has many mansions" (234), "on the seventh day we can rest" (231), etc.

The author may attempt to exercise her volition by proposing a development of action while sensing difficulties in the initial intuitive material but it turns out to lead to questionable results. In this way, Costello tries to draw Rayment away from Marijana, knowing full well that there is no future in this relationship from the point of view of the writer ("stories like that are two a penny"). The only chance of development on Rayment's part is that he traverses his fantasy of wholeness and this cannot happen considering his narcissistic relationship to the Croatian. Therefore Costello comes up with another character, claiming: "She came to me as you came to me […]. A woman in darkness. *Take up a story of such a one*: words in my sleeping ear, spoken by what in the old days we would have called an angel calling me to a wrestling match" (115). But the result, as we have seen, is miserable: a curiously theatrical piece verging on the ridiculous in rather dubious taste and a markedly foreign insertion in the fabric of the narration.

After this initial writerly blunder, Costello takes a back seat, not plotting anything in particular, that is, leaving her will to be replaced by blind intuition, urging it (that is, Rayment) to do something. It is only in the state of inaction that he has to face Costello

and her jibes: "It does not have to be this way, Paul. I say it again: this is your story, not mine. The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away. You will hear no more from me; it will be as if I had never existed" (100). But until he does something, she mourns the disintegration of her narrative, which started so grippingly from the catastrophe: "Think how well you started. What could be better calculated to engage one's attention than the incident on Magill Road […] What a sad decline ever since! Slower and slower, till by now you are almost a halt, trapped in a stuffy flat with a caretaker [Marijana] who could not care less about you" (100).

Rayment's confused state and inaction do not seem to add up to a narrative and a reflection of this is Costello's chaotic jottings in her notebook: "*One leg blue, one red.* […] *Harlequin, crazy-coloured. In Germany, brindle cows are the crazy ones, the moonstruck, the ones that jump over the moon. And the little dog laughs. Bring in a dog, a little mutt that wags its tail to all and sundry, yapping, eager to please? PR* [Paul Rayment]*'s reaction: 'I may be doggy, but not to that extent, surely!' Mutt and Jeff*" (122). When Rayment reads it, his reaction is as follows: "It is as he feared: she knows everything, every jot and tittle. Damn her! All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, darting this way and that, yammering to himself, with the infernal woman standing over him, observing, listening, taking notes, recording his progress" (122).

So, having enough of her, the character (Rayment) chases the author (Costello) from his apartment and as a metaphor for the lack of inspiration, plodding on, wasting and being wasted by the protagonist who does not come off, she starts living, as she claims, in parks, sleeping on benches, etc. – the state of the writer generally becoming unstrung: "A word with which you are familiar, I seem to remember. No more tensile strength. The bowstring that used to be taught has gone as slack and dry as a strand of cotton. And not just the bodily self. The mind too: slack, ready for easeful sleep" (160).

But the lore of the writer is a vulture lore, as Rayment finally concedes: "Even to Marijana he has not really opened his heart. Why then does he lay himself bare before the Costello woman, who is surely no friend to him? There can be only one answer: because she has worn him down. A thoroughly *professional* performance on her part. One takes up position beside one's prey, and waits, and eventually one's prey yields. The sort of thing every priest knows. Or every vulture" (157; italics added). So, towards the end of the book, as the first concession, Rayment comes up with the story of his youth and first love in France, to which Costello reacts with enthusiasm and

wonder: "It is news to me Paul, I promise you. You came to me with no story attached. A man with one leg and an unfortunate passion for his nurse, that was all. Your prior life was a virgin territory" (195).

But time is running out, 203 pages have been written and nothing of substance has happened so far; the book has consisted mainly of the exchanges between Rayment and Costello and a few events the likes of which one can find in every TV series, so Costello keeps urging: "As I try to impress on you, *our days are numbered*, mine and yours, yet here I am killing time, being killed by time, waiting – waiting for you. […] Push!" (203–204; italics added). There is no pushing, however; just the same old fixation, and this is precisely what Costello has to rely on to make him act – if it is impossible to get him to make a fresh start by confronting him with his predicament head-on (as was the case with Marianna), she has to use his fixation as a lever to somehow take him out of himself.

To achieve that, Costello has to implicate herself in Rayment's imaginary self-relation, playing the part of the superego, whispering in his ear like Mephistopheles. Just after Drago, the envy of the gods – whose image has just become even more inflated because he helped Rayment without flinching after he had an accident with a walker in the shower (urinous pyjamas, etc.) – moves out of his flat, Costello's first question is the application of such a lever: "Is your photograph collection fine too?" (217). As this causes a radical desublimation and the aforementioned cursing of gypsies, seeing her stratagem working, she pushes on in the same vein, twisting the screw harder: "Ten to one your beloved Fauchery is still in Drago's hands. Tell him you will call the police if it is not returned at once" (221).

Although this challenge – aimed at revealing his real relation to the Jokićs – is declined, it is declined on grounds of self-interest, not love. It is no longer the heroic "Between Drago and the lightning-bolt of the envious gods he is ready to interpose himself, bare his own breast," but the flatly rational "No. He will just take fright and burn it" (221). But Costello, not discouraged easily, has an even more perverse thought to confront him with: "Then speak to his mother. […] She will be embarrassed. She will do anything to protect her firstborn. […] *Mea culpa. Do with me as you wish*. And so forth. Can't I persuade you? Otherwise what you will be left with? An inconsequential story about being taken for a ride by the gypsies, the high-coloured gypsy woman and a handsome gypsy youth. *Not the main thing at all, the distinguished thing*" (221–22; emphasis added).

Although this suggestion contains a carrot and a stick at the same time, bundling together both Rayment's desire ("She will do any-

thing") and his ultimate horror ("Not […] the distinguished thing," the ridicule of being swindled), in return he, for once, rises up to the role of the true opponent of Costello, refusing to allow her to lead him where she will but proposing that they should exchange places and that he will *write* a letter to Miroslav Jokić. At which Costello has a fit: "A letter! Another letter! What is this, a game of postal chess? Two days for your word to reach Marijana, two days for her word to come back: we will expire of boredom before we have a resolution. This is not the age of epistolary novel, Paul. Go and see her! Confront her!" (227). Despairing, she even brings on stage literary images for Rayment to identify with:

> Think of Don Quixote. *Don Quixote* is not about a man sitting in a rocking chair bemoaning the dullness of La Mancha. It is about a man who claps a basin on his head and clambers onto the back of his faithful old plough-horse and sallies forth to do great deeds. Emma Rouault, Emma Bovary, goes out and buys fancy clothes even though she has no idea of how she is going to pay for them. *We only live once*, says Alonso, says Emma, *so let's give it a whirl!* Give it a whirl, Paul. See what you can come up with. […] Live like a hero. (228–29)

Costello's examples of the heroism to follow are, characteristically, not those from the "serious" high epic tradition Rayment has already attempted to insert himself into ("Between Drago and the lightning-bolt of the envious gods he is ready to interpose himself, bare his own breast"), but from modern mock-epic in which the comic and tragic cannot be disentangled because one is just the reverse of the other – there is no other way to become a hero than by pursuing the way of the comic; the very ridicule, by persevering in it, becomes the modern incarnation of the tragic. So we are returning here to our old motif of overcoming the petrifying qualities of the gaze of the Other – Costello sums up her injunction to action in an exemplary way: "Consider: somewhere in a jungle in Maharashtra State a tiger is at this very moment opening its amber eyes, *and it is not thinking of you at all!* It could not care less about you or any other of the denizens of Coniston Terrace [where Rayment lives]" (229).

Not surprisingly, Rayment remains unconvinced but the lever in a way does its work, and so Costello and he, in order not to remain stuck with the ridiculous image of being swindled by gypsies, take a taxi to Munno Para to confront the Jokićs. On arrival, the reaction of the writer who creates it all is rather amusing (sarcastic?): " 'So real!' enthuses Elizabeth Costello, getting out of the car. 'So authen-

tic!' " And in a mock-reversal of her initiatory gesture,[14] as if she were proud of the vividness of the image of "the [so-far] dark continent of Munno Para," (241) she addresses Rayment: "Would you like me to give you a hand?" (242) Thus, in her excitement, the showdown awaited for so long takes place in which Rayment finally admits to being thoroughly humiliated but this time explicitly *in his own eyes*.

Firstly, visiting the Jokićs at their home makes all their exoticism disappear, the exoticism which, depending on the perspective, has served as either source of charm ("Marijana would have set him right, had he only met her in time, Marijana from Catholic Croatia") or excuse for callousness ("What else of mine have they stolen, these Croatian gypsies?"): the ethnic substance vanishes into thin air – as Costello comments upon seeing this typically Australian household: "Our friends the Jokićs have a lifestyle to support" (243). Secondly, Rayment's imaginary obsession with photographic "substance" is ridiculed as precisely "ethnic," "primitive" superstition: "Is just images. […] Is modern thing. Images, who they belong to? You want to say, I point camera at you […] I am thief, I steal your image?" (249) Thirdly, and most importantly, in the gift prepared for him he is confronted by the truth of his accusation that Marijana does not rise up to her calling ("when a nurse is called, a proper nurse, she doesn't ask questions, she comes"), and of the Jokićs in general as being gypsies – theirs is attention he does not deserve: "He can feel a blush creeping over him, a blush of shame, starting at his ears and creeping forward over his face. He has no wish to stop it. It is what he deserves. 'It's magnificent,' he says. […] *Munificent too*, he might add, but does not. He knows what he pays Marijana; he can guess what Miroslav earns. *Much more than I deserve*" (254).

Yet the gift is of troublesome nature – it is a recumbent bicycle, in other words, a version of prosthesis which he had and still has no intention of accepting: "The breeze is in his face. For a moment he allows himself to imagine he is rolling down Magill Road, the pennant fluttering brightly overhead to remind the world to have mercy on him. A perambulator, that is what it is most like: a perambulator with a grizzled old baby in it, out for a ride. How the bystanders will smile! Smile and laugh and whistle: *Good on you, grandpa!*" (256). Thus, as it was with the prosthesis, driving the recumbent bike is perceived by him as lethal to his dignity. It is only as long as he

[14] "Will you give me your hand? […] Wanting to be sure […] that our two bodies would not just pass through each other. Naïve, of course. We are not ghosts, either of us – why should I have thought so?" (81).

feels shame for other reasons (misjudgement of the Jokićs)[15] that he is able to stoop to something he feels degrades him. But when the acuteness of shame dissipates a little, he makes a last effort and resorts for help to his imaginary version of Marijana: " 'What do you think, Marijana?' he says […] She has seen from the beginning how he has striven to save his manly dignity, and has never jeered at him for it. […] Should he go on battling for dignity or is it time to capitulate? […] 'Yeah,' says Marijana slowly. 'It suits you. I think you should give it a whirl" (256–57).[16]

With this pronouncement Marijana seems to drop out of the role assigned to her within the enchanted circle of Rayment's imaginary identifications, yet she does it without completing her "mission." Although within Rayment's imaginary economy she is supposed to save him (his image) from incompleteness and therefore degradation ("Marijana would have set him right, had he only met her in time," etc.), her role should perhaps be conceived as that of the one best prepared to excise this imaginary treasure from him, as she, having left her old life (her "substance") behind, is the living proof of the possibility of such an operation. Her effort, however, is of no avail; she is not able to save him from his sad fate – his fixation survives all: "Of course he will never put it to use. It will go into the store room at Coniston Terrace and there gather dust. All the time and trouble the Jokićs have put into it will be for nothing" (256). And just as Marijana's effort did not meet with success, the same can be said about the writer's production of the final confrontation: although in Munno Para Rayment faces his truth, that is, the shameful nature of his perverse enjoyment, he remains unreconstructed, and thus of no further use to the author. Therefore, he is allowed to take his leave: "he leans forward and kisses [Costello] thrice in the formal manner he was taught as a child, left right left" (263). And hence the reader also is relieved. We have witnessed the way the writer can put to narrative use his writer's block – which may be the ultimate ironic gesture – but, unlike in Fellini's *8½*, the irony does not seem to come off: *Slow Man* is a narrative in which the reader (at least this reader) thoroughly identifies with the impatience and boredom of Elizabeth Costello.

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[15] "Not just hours. Days, weeks. They must have spent weeks on it, father, son; mother too. The blush has not left his face, and he does not want it to" (255).

[16] We should not forget that precisely this was how Costello formulated her injunction to live *like a hero*: "*We only live once*, says Alonso, says Emma, *so let's give it a whirl!* Give it a whirl, Paul."

Autobiography as Fiction: *Boyhood* (1998), *Youth* (2002), *Summertime* (2009)

The turn of the century marked an unexpected development in the work of J. M. Coetzee – an author so far considered to be reclusive and taciturn started writing autobiographical fiction. Or so it seemed, at least.

Coetzee's first "autobiographical" book, entitled *Boyhood* and published in 1998, does not really arouse suspicion, because all that is unconventional about the narration can easily be explained away precisely by reference to the well-known personal reticence of the author. Therefore the use of third-person narration ("he" instead of a self-referential "I") could be interpreted as simply a strategy that, on the one hand, helps to restrain emotional effusion and, on the other, indicates to the reader throughout that what is being read is "*autre*-biography," a narrative construction of a subjectivity the writer no longer is and no longer entirely recognizes himself in. Moreover, third-person narration in autobiography is not so unusual after all, having a very long and respectable tradition that goes at least as far back as Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de bello Gallico* and to old religious and devotional autobiographies in which the authors refer to themselves as "servants of God." Apart from that, the use of the third person in modern autobiography must bring to mind the famous *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), which perfectly dovetails into Coetzee's agenda: the author often refers to himself in an ironic mode and one of the autobiography's basic propositions is that the education he was provided with did not prepare him to

understand the world in which he was supposed to live. Although *Boyhood* does not expatiate on general matters such as the state of western civilization, the issue of not being able to fit in and the reasons for it are some of its most important motifs, and the emphasis on a more social, "objective" perspective – already made by means of the "external" third-person narration – is strengthened by beginning the autobiographical account not from early childhood but when the protagonist is already ten years old. Because the conventional aim of autobiography is to tell the story of how one has become who one is, and the twentieth-century commonplace is that early childhood is the period most responsible for this, this decision on the part of autobiographer is telling.[1]

The above "disfigurements" of the convention are themselves rather conventional, so readers of *Boyhood* did not really have problems with adjusting their perspective and greeting the new work as a welcome account of the spiritual torments of a sensitive boy in South Africa under apartheid, especially from an author usually placed by journalists and critics under the rubric "the ethics of writing." Moreover, what could be better than the marrying of the ethics to one of the best-selling genres of our times, celebrity autobiography? But perhaps some second thoughts on the works Coetzee had previously written should have given the readers of *Boyhood* pause and disincline them to warmly welcome one of their favourites' overcoming of taciturnity about his private matters. One of the things that might have made them wary is that in his earlier works we very often encounter metafictional interaction with classic authors who used autobiography and confession as one of their basic narrative strategies, writers such as Daniel Defoe and Fyodor Dostoevsky (both of them protagonists of Coetzee novels). Defoe is especially crucial here – his case reminds us that in its beginnings the novel (fiction) frequently took the form of autobiographical prose, often making use of related genres like diary, memoir or letter. Another hint pointing at the problematic status of autobiographical accounts was Coetzee's critical essay from 1985 entitled *Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky*, which explicitly thematises a number of issues pertinent to the "truth-value" of confession or autobiography.

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[1] Because Coetzee is known for his admiration of the nineteenth-century Russian writers like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, he must have been aware that he follows (pastiches?) the example of Leo Tolstoy's autobiography in three parts: *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, *Youth* – with the first part conspicuously missing.

In this essay, Coetzee starts his analysis of confessional literature from its founding specimen, Augustine's *Confessions*, and singles out the famous episode of the theft of pears, which were stolen by the future saint and his friends not in order to be eaten (they throw them to the hogs) but to commit a forbidden act. This is how Coetzee describes the aim of the confessional project: "In Augustine's story, the theft of the pears is the transgression, but what calls to be confessed is something that lies behind the theft, a truth about himself that he does not yet know."[2] To explain reasons for committing a transgression is relatively easy (in a group "we are ashamed not to be shameless," says Augustine[3]); but it is much more difficult to uncover the "truth" about oneself, that is, to explain "what is wrong with me," because it demands looking at oneself from a position which has yet to be created by means of writing the report of one's (sinful) life. In other words, it is only narration (that is, "literature"), which seems to produce the truth of an existence.

But the question remains whether the truth of such a confession is an innocent truth. What complicates matters here is shown by Coetzee using the example of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the founding father of modern confession as autobiography. Rousseau starts his own *Confessions* with the promise that he will say everything about himself in the account of his life, including the most shameful matters. The result is that such confessional "material," ignoble and mean acts, becomes the basic currency of the exchange between the confessor and his reader, because it is the utter sincerity itself which for Rousseau proves the originality of his work – the shameful moments make his confession (and himself) absolutely unique. Therefore, not only does the disclosure of embarrassing acts and desires become the narrative core of the work, it also turns into a kind of bragging, because what is disclosed is intended to fascinate the reader and intensify the experience of reading. Because a "decent" autobiography tries to seduce us by means of a fascinating depiction of the image of a childhood or the heroism or endurance of the protagonist, it risks sentimentality and bathos. Instead of these, the autobiographer can alternatively resort to lack of charity, or distaste towards his former self, as ways to enliven the autobiographic narration, and can furthermore imply that such "colouring" makes it more truthful. The mechanism we are describing here perfectly fits

[2] J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 252.

[3] Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 2, par. 9, trans. E. B. Pusey. 18 June 2010, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm#link2H_4_0002.

its historical context, since the time of Rousseau's *Confessions*, the second half of the eighteenth century, was also a time of gradual reformulation of western aesthetic foundations in which the notion of sublimity plays a major part. Although shame features neither in Burke's nor in Kant's theories, its function in *Confessions* is veritably sublime as it simultaneously invokes guilt (pain or displeasure) while being the source of the pleasure of confessing.

Although such sublimity is, if anything, perverse and comic, and thus quite removed from the high-tragic sublime of Romantic theory, it is precisely here that we find the ugly hidden face of the boundless wealth of the inner self and other paradoxical Romantic infinities. But this is not all. Because an account whose aim is to tell the whole truth (whether it is the truth of "the inner self," as in the case of Rousseau, or the truth of "what is wrong with me," as in the case of Augustine) is supposed to give meaning to existence, it necessarily has to be narratively coherent. What is, however, the nature of such truth? Is it on the side of empirical facts or on the side of narration? Because the signifier has its own "non-empirical" rules of functioning, narration in order to become coherent will necessarily give empirical reference the slip and therefore become (at least relatively) autonomous.[4] This dualism of the empirical and the narrative is, of course, at least as old as modernity and results in an often-repeated claim: "it may not be true to the letter, but it is true to the spirit."[5] Even Rousseau is, in a sense, aware of this complication when, for instance, he claims that in many cases he put too much blame on himself (if we judge his guilt by empirical reference), but that the narration (about his inner truth) somehow demanded it.

Coetzee's *Boyhood* is very Rousseauian in the choice of scenes from the past – it mostly consists of moments in which the protagonist is filled with shame or embarrassment and the central motif is his Augustinian feeling that "something is wrong with me." To explain this "wrongness," however, it is not enough to lay out a map of the protagonist's self, because there is a strong political dimension to his failure to fit in. The protagonist considers himself abnormal because this is how he sees his family. Although both of his parents had grown up in quite typical, patriarchal Afrikaans families, they made their own into something monstrous according to Africaans standards. Firstly, they speak English, not Afrikaans, at home; sec-

[4] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 296.

[5] J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (New York: Viking, 2009), 32. Further references in the body of the text.

ondly, they are religiously indifferent; but most horribly of all, they are not patriarchal: the protagonist, as the beloved child of the mother, is first in importance at home, then comes his younger brother, and the father is almost a stranger in his own home ("He denies and detests his father"[6]).

This absence of patriarchal authority and its effects is an important and continuous motif in Coetzee's autobiographical writing, even if it is perhaps not so visible at first sight. However, the absence is not so entirely absent, because authority seems to adopt a rather convoluted displaced form. Although for the protagonist and his parents nationalist Afrikaners stand for all that is primitive and stupid, what the boy loves the most in the world is the farm in the Karoo where his father grew up and which now belongs to his uncle. And there is nothing more Afrikaans than an almost ecstatic attachment to the farm and agriculture, as Coetzee argues in his essays on the literature of white South Africans, *White Writing*.[7] The boy's love is paradoxical, because not only is the farm the mythical Afrikaans inheritance, but it also incorporates everything he, in other circumstances, seems to hate: a typical patriarchal family, the Afrikaans language, and a feudal hierarchy of classes (the Coloured workers call him *die kleinbaas*, the little master). Moreover, the phrase which is most often repeated to him there is "mustn't." But on the farm everything which in the town is hateful seems good, because it gets translated into a mythical narration: there is no corruption here ("In a corner of the stoep, in the shade of the bougainvillea, hangs a canvas water-bottle. The hotter the day, the cooler the water – a miracle, like the miracle of the meat that hangs in the dark of the storeroom and does not rot, like the miracle of the pumpkins that lie on the roof in the blazing sun and stay fresh. On the farm, it seems, there is no decay" (82–3)); everything tastes exquisite ("Everything in the Karoo is delicious, the peaches, the watermelons, the pumpkin, the mutton, as though whatever can find sustenance in this arid earth is thereby blessed" (90)); the killing of animals is not just killing but a ritual, and the Coloured people are perfectly innocent and respected as workers ("the shearers […] are country-bred and have never so much as heard of dishonesty" (93)), while in towns they seem only to beg.[8]

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[6] J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), 79. Further references in the body of the text.

[7] J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

[8] There is only one hint in this mythical narration that such perfectly natural feudal order is perhaps not so natural after all. While hunting is one of the most

Paradoxically, this image of the ideal corporate order, where all, even Nature, joyfully take their place in the hierarchy – a strictly patriarchal one – becomes ascribed to the mother: "He has two mothers. Twice-born: born from woman and born from the farm. Two mothers and no father" (96). What is more, the boy knows that his love of the farm is a "betrayal" of the mother – the father's relatives do not approve of her, nor do they approve of his father's low status in his own family. The mother (liberal relativism) and the farm (hierarchic patriarchal order) exclude each other.

Although the mother's family also used to have a farm, their relationship to it was different – it was just bought by the mother's father as an investment. The mother remembers the farm quite warmly, but when the boy browses through her photographs from the 1930s and 40s it turns out that her life had nothing to do with working the land, because it consisted mainly of parties, tennis, hockey and trips to Europe. But although there are no farmers in the mother's family, we come across writers there. A brother of the boy's grandmother, uncle Albert, "has spent his days writing books and stories; his wife has been the one to go out and work" (120). Interestingly, although the mother says that these books are very old-fashioned and people do not read things like that anymore, in the South African context they have quite telling titles: "One is called *Kain*, the other *Die Sondes van die vaders*, The Sins of the Fathers" (120). There is also a book entitled *Deur 'n gevaarlike krankheid tot ewige genesing* (*Through a Dangerous Malady to Eternal Healing*), whose author, Balthasar du Biel, came to South Africa from Pomerania as a missionary. The book has an important, although ambiguous, place in the history of the family:

> The book was written by his great-grandfather, Aunt Annie's father; to it – he has heard the story many times – she has devoted most of her life, first translating the manuscript from German into Afrikaans, then spending her savings to pay a printer in Stellenbosch to print hundreds of copies, and a binder to bind some of them, then touring the bookshops of Cape Town. […] He has tried to read *Ewige Genesing*, but it is too boring. No sooner has

popular white pastimes, the gun is a forbidden object to the Coloured workers: "Though they will not explain themselves, the workers seem to have a holy terror of guns" (90). A holy terror of guns is not something you are born with, as any holy terror is rather the outcome of quite painful conditioning. But this "unnatural" support of the perfect order has to be repressed from the mythical narration: "'You mustn't ask them to touch guns,' [the boy's uncle] says. 'They know they mustn't.' […] They mustn't. Why not? No one will tell him" (90).

> Balthasar du Biel got under way with the story of his boyhood in Germany than he interrupts it with long reports of lights in the sky and voices speaking to him out of heavens. The whole of the book seems to be like that: short bits about himself followed by long recounting of what the voices told him. (118)

Clearly, the first autobiography in the family was written by a psychotic and one of the interpretations of the origins of psychosis is the lack of proper inscription of paternal authority.[9]

The father is treated as both a weakling and an enemy by his elder son, and evokes in him strong aggressive emotions, but before *Boyhood* ends, he totally disgraces himself in the eyes of the boy and becomes a completely inconsequential figure. The mother supports the family as the father falls further and further into debt and drinking. The final image of the sleeping father contains nothing but distaste: "His father is wearing pyjama pants and a cotton singlet. He has not shaved. There is a red V at his throat where sunburn gives way to the pallor of his chest. Beside the bed is a chamber-pot in which cigarette-stubs float in brownish urine. He has not seen anything uglier in his life" (159).

After Tolstoy's *Boyhood* came his *Youth*, and so did Coetzee's, which was published in 2002. Written in the same manner (third-person narration, emphasis on everything shameful), it describes the protagonist's last years in South Africa and his sojourn in England. It starts when he is 19 and ends in 1964 (when he is 24), just before he decides to quit his job in England and apply for a grant to write a Ph.D. in the U.S. where he relocates in 1965. *Youth* can almost be seen as a spiteful version of the later parts of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (although without Joyce's epiphanic ambitions) and is even more scathing toward the protagonist than *Boyhood*. Although the protagonist's parents and their background are almost completely absent from the narration, in a somewhat displaced and abstracted manner they haunt what is being written throughout. In *Youth*, we meet a young man who has translated his impossibly contradictory fundamental mythic narration of the farm into another mythic account of wholeness, which, at first sight, seems to be less convoluted. As the protagonist tells us, he has begun the work of

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[9] See Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses* (Seminar III), ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); and Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), XII, 3–82.

transforming himself into a different person, that is, he becomes an aspiring poet whose main guides are Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Both are American poets of a special kind: they – like Henry James before them – treated the U.S. as a cultural wasteland, moved to Europe and tried to become more European than Europeans by writing highly erudite poetry and literary criticism. In Coetzee's caustic account the guidance is described as follows:

> As guides to reading he relies upon Eliot and Pound. On their authority he dismisses without a glance shelf after shelf of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Meredith. Nor is anything that came out of nineteenth-century Germany or Italy or Spain or Scandinavia worthy of attention. Russia may have produced some interesting monsters but as artists the Russians have nothing to teach. Civilisation since the eighteenth century has been an Anglo-French affair.
>
> On the other hand, there are pockets of high civilisation in remoter times that one cannot afford to neglect: not only Athens and Rome but also the Germany of Walther von der Vogelweide, the Provence of Arnaut Daniel, the Florence of Dante and Guido Cavalcanti, to say nothing of Tang China and Moghul India and Almoravid Spain. So unless he learns Chinese and Persian and Arabic, or at least enough of the languages to read their classics with a crib, he might as well be a barbarian.[10]

What we find here is not only the naïveté of an aspiring provincial author who does not see in the writers he admires precisely his own predicament, resulting in attempts to hide their literary inferiority complex by means of hyper-erudition. It is also not difficult to see the exchange of one mythical paternal heritage (the myth of the farm) for another mythical creation, this time that of his spiritual fathers. The whole concept of (western) tradition as described in Eliot's famous critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" presents the image of a timeless sacred nourishing ground, absent which one is just one's despicable everyday self – it is hierarchic ("an ideal order"[11]) but its hierarchy seems to be of the natural-motherly kind, that is, its coercive foundation is repressed.[12] As living on the

[10] J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (New York: Viking, 2002), 25–26. Further references in the body of the text.

[11] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in: *Twentieth Century Poetry*: *Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Graham Martin and P. N. Furbank (Milton Keynes: The Open University Press, 1975), 80.

[12] As on the farm the "mustn'ts" are not treated as coercive by the boy, so are the "mustn'ts" of Eliot's tradition. They are on the side of Nature/Mother, and the coercive Father (Prohibition) disappears from the picture.

farm was living the Truth itself (mythical and therefore timeless – no decay), now creating Art becomes the very practice of Truth. And the Truth of Art is not only timeless but also placeless – at least in theory. When the protagonist lacks poetic inspiration, he thinks of trying his hand in prose in the manner of his role models:

> But if he is going to write prose then he may have to go the whole hog and become a Jamesian. Henry James shows one how to rise above mere nationality. In fact, it is not always clear where a piece by James is set, in London or Paris or New York, so supremely above the mechanics of everyday life is James. People in James do not have to pay the rent; they certainly do not have to hold down jobs; all they are required to do is to have super-subtle conversations whose effect is to bring about tiny shifts of power, shifts so minute as to be invisible to all but the practiced eye. When enough such shifts have taken place, the balance of power between the personages of the story is (*Voilà!*) revealed to have suddenly and irreversibly changed. And that is that: the story has fulfilled its charge and can be brought to an end. (64)

But when he actually gets down to it, the outcome turns out to be rather disturbing, although in his own estimation not so bad after all. Or perhaps what is disturbing is precisely this: that a story set in South Africa happens to be quite decent.

> The story is set in South Africa. It disquiets him to see that he is still writing about South Africa. […] Though the story he has written is minor (no doubt about that), it is not bad. Nevertheless, he sees no point in trying to publish it. The English will not understand it. For the beach in the story they will summon up an English idea of a beach, a few pebbles lapped by wavelets. They will not see a dazzling space of sand at the foot of rocky cliffs pounded by breakers, with gulls and cormorants screaming overhead as they battle the wind. (62)

This slip into parental inheritance has continuation. Although what the protagonist is supposed to be doing in London is writing a thesis on Ford Madox Ford (a writer of Pound and Eliot's circle), Ford's lesser-known works that he finds in the British Library turn out to be boring. So, as a diversion from his arduous and high-minded task, he dips into the until-recently self-forbidden territory of books on South Africa with stimulating results:

> On days when, sitting in the great, domed Reading Room, he finds himself too exhausted or bored to write any more, he allows himself the luxury of dipping into books about the South Africa of the old days, books to be found only in great libraries, memoirs of visitors to the Cape like Dapper and Kolbe and Sparrman and Barrow and Burchell, published in Holland or Germany or England two centuries ago.
>
> It gives him an eerie feeling to sit in London reading about streets – Waalstraat, Buitengracht, Buitencingel – along which he alone, of all the people around him with their heads buried in their books, has walked. But even more than by accounts of old Cape Town is he captivated by stories of ventures into the interior, reconnaissances by ox-wagon into the desert of the Great Karoo, where a traveller could trek for days on end without clapping eyes on a living soul. Zwartberg, Leeuwriver, Dwyka: it is his country, the country of his heart, that he is reading about. (136–37)

Moreover, while inspiration for "international" prose and poetry is painfully lacking, interesting projects for South Africa-based literary works – projects which demand research of the South African mundane – rush forth unbidden:

> He would like to do it: to write a book as convincing as Burchell's and lodge it in this library that defines all libraries. […] The challenge he faces is a purely literary one: to write a book whose horizon of knowledge will be that of Burchell's time, the 1820s, yet whose response to the world around it will be alive in a way that Burchell, despite his energy and intelligence and curiosity and sang-froid, could not be because he was an Englishman in a foreign country, his mind occupied with Pembrokeshire and the sisters he had left behind.
>
> He will have to school himself to write from within the 1820s. Before he can bring that off he will need to know less than he knows now; he will need to forget things. Yet before he can forget he will have to know what to forget; before he can know less he will have to know more. Where will he find what he needs to know? He has no training as an historian, and anyway what he is after will not be in history books, since it belongs to the mundane, a mundane as common as the air one breathes. Where will he find the common knowledge of a bygone world, a knowledge too humble to know it as knowledge? (138–39)

The project described above will come to fruition (although not exactly in the form projected here) in Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands*, but before it happens, he would have to go to the U.S. to be purified

of his "internationalism" even more and would have to be forced to return to South Africa by the U.S. authorities.[13]

As we have already noted, *Boyhood* seemed to be, and was received as, a relatively unproblematic piece of autobiography and so was its sequel, *Youth*. But while some readers may enjoy the ironic portrait of the deluded would-be poet as a product of the disgust of an ageing double-Booker Prize winner toward his former self, more careful ones may notice something one was not in a position to detect in *Boyhood*. Because *Boyhood* dealt with the long-gone family past (Coetzee's life between 10 and 14), there was little chance for the general reader to check the veracity of the facts presented there. But for *Youth* this is no longer the case and, although not much may be known about Coetzee's life, one can note that there are certain facts which are missing from the book and since these facts are absolutely fundamental, the veracity of the entire account can be legitimately questioned. The crucial absence is this: Coetzee married in 1963, and there is no trace of this event in the account of his life, which is otherwise so full of excruciating introspections. However one considers marriage, it is rather difficult to expunge it completely from one's autobiography. So the question arises whether the account we are given is "true" or whether it is just clever fiction. The problem here is not just the problem of perspective, of "*autre*-biography," that a "me" from fifty years ago is really a "he" in whom I do not recognise myself anymore; but whether what we take to be a "truthful" account is not just a matter of fabulation which ignores the autobiographical contract with the reader that the author shall not intentionally write untruths. Because what we encounter here is more than ambiguity, it is the question whether a novelist ("fictioneer") be allowed to remain a novelist also in producing an account of his life, whether he be allowed to "cheat" (in the name of the spirit of truth?).

Additional light on these matters is cast by another development in Coetzee's fiction which happened around the turn of the millennium. More or less at the time he was writing *Boyhood* Coetzee also wrote an ambiguous work whose aim was to balance on the very edge of fiction. When he was invited in 1997 and 1998 to Princeton to deliver a series of lectures on human values, he performed a very curious (not to say: perfidious) gesture: instead of delivering his own views, he read out to his public a work of fiction about a renowned

[13] Coetzee's application for residency in the U.S. was turned down because of his participation in a protest against the war in Vietnam.

(non-existent) Australian writer named Elizabeth Costello who had been invited to a fictitious American university to deliver two lectures on topics of her choice and surprised her hosts, who expected the lectures on literary matters, by delivering two speeches praising compassion towards animals and criticising the eating of meat.[14] It is well-known that Coetzee himself is a sworn vegetarian (or perhaps vegan) because of his compassion for animals, and so Costello's claims may be his own, but not only does he present these views as the views of a fictional character (so he can disown them), he also introduces the character of Costello's daughter-in-law, Norma, a philosopher, who presents to the reader the most obvious philosophical reservations about Costello's stance. Therefore, we cannot be sure what Coetzee himself thinks, where he is *as himself*. Although we know that he is a vegetarian and probably shares Costello's claims, he *narratively* so complicates the status of truth of his position that we do not know where we stand – an adversary cannot take the position of an adversary, because he does not know the whereabouts of the position he would like to attack.

But who is Costello's adversary here? In the context of the fiction called *The Lives of Animals*, it is most of all academic reason. Summarising a number of arguments which disavow the comparison of the death of an animal to that of a human being, Costello points out that they are all founded on the claim that animals do not understand their death; that is, they do not think, and it is precisely such tautology of reason which she finds questionable: "Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe – what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems, as systems of totality, do not have that power. If there were a position from which reason could attack and dethrone itself, reason would already have occupied that position; otherwise it would not be total."[15] Because reason uses categories of its own creation to describe the world, it is delighted by the reasonability of the world and its own capability to reason. If we take into consideration that Costello is a kind of Coetzee alter-ego, we may see the literary construction we are

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[14] The "lectures" were published as *The Lives of Animals* (1999), in which they were followed by commentaries of known academics representing literary studies, philosophy, religious studies, and anthropology. They are also included (without the commentaries) in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a collection of hybrid forms, most of them half way between essay and fiction. More on *The Lives of Animals* in the Postscript to the present book.

[15] J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 25.

describing as Coetzee's attempt to attack such tautology. Without completely abandoning rational argumentation, he wants to make it difficult for rationalism to play its narcissistic game with itself. In other words, Coetzee strengthens the critique of reason by means of creating a literary space where reason has difficulty finding the (stable) position it is used to. We can therefore say that, by creating his metanarration (a lecture describing a lecture), Coetzee wanted to appeal to a different kind of reasoning. This other kind of reasoning would not rely exclusively on rationalistic logic that so far has just been used to justify cruelty, which is not a command of reason.

Although the title *The Lives of Animals* is probably meant to convey the vegetarian credo of compassion, perhaps it is not entirely accidental that it also carries a biographical and apologetic hint (in line with *The Lives of the Apostles* or *The Life of St Francis*). If in *Boyhood* the autobiographical illusion was intact, and if this impression of truth still carried on into *Youth* (although here there are signs of its disintegration), after the statement (or was it a preliminary experiment?) of *The Lives of Animals* something had to happen to the convention of autobiography and its relation to truth. One plausible outcome would have been the abandonment of the form – a decision not to return to autobiographical prose again. The likelihood of this possibility was reinforced by the fact that Coetzee's time in the U.S. had been briefly recounted by him in a text entitled "Remembering Texas"[16] and that continuing with his autobiography after returning to South Africa would have meant providing to the general reader a more or less fictional account of his mind during the time of writing of the works he is known for, which seemed extremely unlikely. Yet in 2009 Coetzee published *Summertime*, which might be treated as a continuation of *Boyhood* and *Youth* by different means. Even the title remains ironically in line: after boyhood (sentimental education) and youth (struggle to become an artist), summertime, the time of coming to bloom, of writing his first two novels, *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), but before international recognition came with *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).

Summertime is a kind of autobiography which is not an autobiography, a post-Costelloan work, which is even more convoluted than *The Lives of Animals*. Subtitled "fiction" by Coetzee, it consists of supposed extracts from "Coetzee's" notebooks which open (dated:

[16] This is another text, written in 1984, from which his wife and, what is more, his two children (born 1966 and 1968) are also completely absent. But this account is really very brief (it occupies four pages in the collection *Doubling the Point*), so one cannot compare it to *Youth*.

1972–1975) and close (undated) the book, and an account by a Mr Vincent, "Coetzee's" biographer, of his conversations with five people whom "Coetzee" knew: four women he was supposedly in love with and a male friend.[17] Moreover, in this fictional world "Coetzee" is already dead, so the conversations occur posthumously, and on top of that the facts from the life of the "real" Coetzee, the author of *Summertime*, very often do not match with what we read about in the accounts. And this also includes the notebooks, not only other people's relations. To mention just the most flagrant discrepancy: as already said, by 1968 Coetzee had a wife and two children and his mother died in 1985. In *Summertime*, which takes place in the 1970s, "Coetzee" lives alone with his father and his mother is already dead. Even the name of the cousin he fell in love with when he was six, who appears in *Boyhood* as Agnes, and who is one of Vincent's interviewees, is changed to Margot.

What is the purpose of all this confusion? We have already hinted at two possibilities. One: because of Coetzee's taciturnity about himself, it was very unlikely he would have liked to discuss openly his sources of inspiration and the process of writing his novels.[18] Two: when it comes to his personal matters and opinions, Coetzee likes to complicate the discursive space so much that his audience can never be sure of their position and therefore of their relation to the "object" that is presented to them. But his game with "truth" is very ambiguous in *Summertime*. On the one hand, the above two points can be construed as testifying to Coetzee's adamant refusal to provide his audience with what it wants by not meeting their expectations. But, on the other hand, what he does provide his readers with is precisely such fulfilment: much of the women's accounts is devoted to the discussion of sexual life and other intimate matters. If such information serves its stimulating purpose, does it, in the last instance, matter whether the facts are fact or fiction?

But there are other reasons for changing the perspective to an external one, which are less ambiguous and definitely serve their purpose. *Summertime* is a continuation of the exercise of shaming oneself begun in *Boyhood* and continued in *Youth*. But, as we have already noted, shame has a very tricky status, because it tends to become the main currency of exchange between the writer and the reader, that is, it is conducive to discourse which has an inclina-

[17] I use quotation marks to refer to the character appearing in *Summertime*.

[18] Although it can be argued that, in a metafictional and impersonal way, he did this in *Slow Man* (2005), where the relationship between Costello and Rayment is interpreted as one between a writer and her protagonist.

tion to autonomise itself, and hence instead of diminishing, it inflates the confessor's status within the space of narration. But one should perhaps be more precise and distinguish between shame and embarrassment: the former is productive of discourse, the latter remains silent.[19] This distinction may clarify the turn Coetzee is able to accomplish with *Summertime* by means of creating his new narrators. Although in *Boyhood* and *Youth* he treated his former self with great derision and distaste, he always ended up in the position of a Rousseau, who confesses with relish, whose disclosures are to give him and his audience an additional thrill, pleasure or whatever one calls such "indecent" excitation. What is more, this masochistic pleasure can be extended indefinitely because it becomes divorced from empirical constraints as it starts to obey its own logic, the autonomous logic of the signifier. Therefore in order to actually evoke his protagonist's embarrassment, Coetzee has to close off his "interiority" and present his predicament from the outside, precisely because

> The embarrassed person [...] has nothing to say and knows only that there would be something to say and that he cannot say it. The embarrassed person has no inner wealth to which he is merely unable to give expression: he dries out where the paralysis of the tongue seizes him and he stutters himself away. There is nothing to expect from him; he does not have the depth of still waters. His failure is without reason, deep or otherwise, his falling silent not the silencing of anything. Embarrassment is flat, an emptiness without depth.[20]

What is more, there is another narratively aimed twist here, as it is precisely this mute embarrassment as such, which is productive of the discourse of the others in *Summertime*. The above description of the all-embracing paralysis is just a neutral version of all the passionate accusations the biographer Vincent hears from the women who pronounce on "Coetzee" in the novel. Although their levels of spite and gall vary, they all accuse him of basically the same things: he is a stiff, inhibited "wooden man," which is meant personally, but also translates into the estimation of his status as a writer. Of course, the form of the accusation depends on the intellectual level

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[19] E. S. Burt, *Regard for the Other: Autothanatography in Rousseau, De Quincey, Baudelaire and Wilde* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 62.

[20] Hans-Jost Frey, *Interruptions*, trans. Georgia Albert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 72–73.

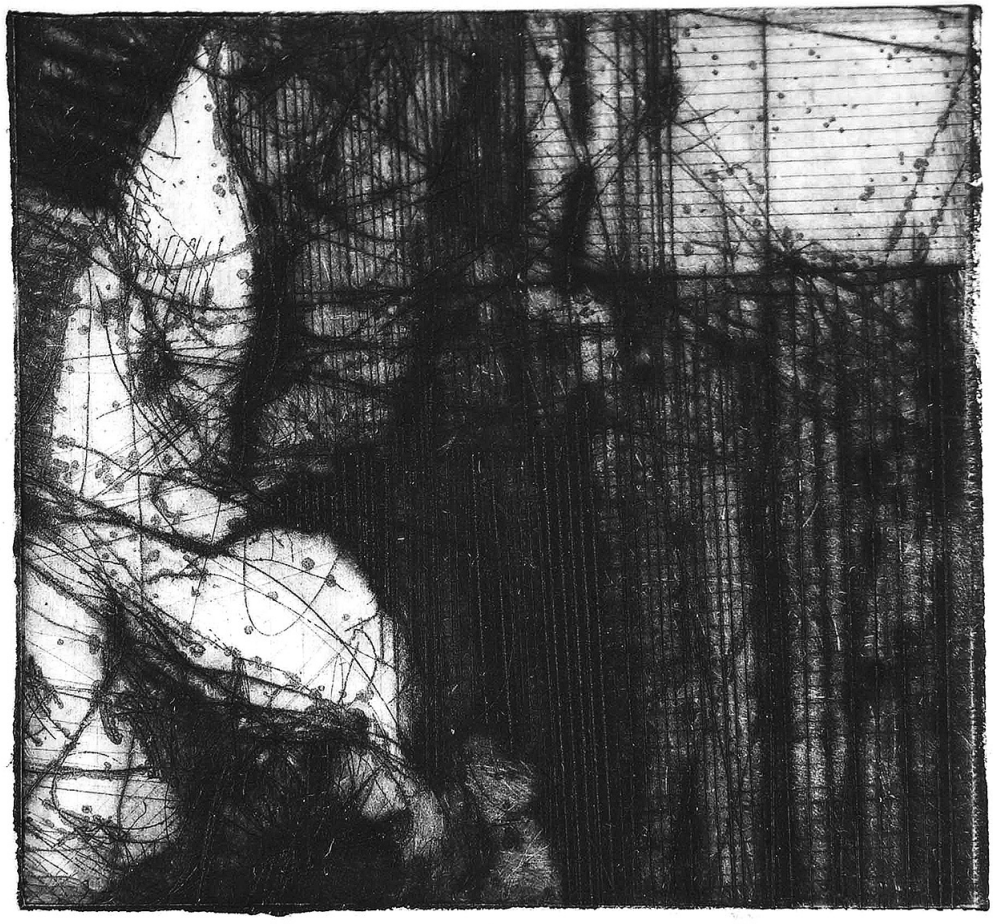
of the accuser, so it can range from "How can you be a great writer when you know nothing about love" (199)[21] to "As a writer he knew what he was doing, he had a certain style, and style is the beginning of distinction. But he had no special sensitivity that I could detect, no original insight into the human condition" (242). Yet the ultimate goal is the denial of "depth," of "inner wealth," that is, the denial of exactly these qualities a Rousseauian confession is after in order to stimulate itself. It is perhaps ironic that Coetzee chose women to be such harsh judges here, because the qualities they see lacking in "Coetzee" are not only the content of conventional (auto)biography – the Augustinian coherent narration of the depth of subjectivity is precisely the foundation of the ideal patriarchal order: all incoherence has to be explained away, so that sinful obscurity disappears and the soul can rest itself in the divine wholeness of transparent meaning.

But there is yet another turn of interpretation that should be made here. Although women are the main voices in *Summertime*, I do not think they are the main presence for the reader. The book is structured in such a way that the figure of the father appears as most haunting: it is not only that "Coetzee's" preliminary and final notes focus mainly on the father; he is also an acute presence in three of the five accounts that constitute the main body of the book. Moreover, unlike the transparent *slapgat* ("A *slap gat*: a rectum, an anus, over which one has less than complete control. Hence *slapgat*: slack, spineless" (116)) figure of *Boyhood* who was so easily dismissed by the protagonist, in *Summertime* the father more and more appears as an enigma to his son, and here perhaps the autobiographic project finds its fulfilment as the son's memory keeps returning to the past in order to become conscious of the so-far ungraspable originary impulse for his confession: "If he could summon up the courage, he would at least make full confession: *Forgive me for deliberately and with malice aforethought scratching your Tebaldi record. And for more besides, so much more that the recital would take all day. For countless acts of meanness. For the meanness of heart in which those acts originated. In sum, for all I have done since the day I was born, and with success, to make your life a misery*" (250; emphasis original).

In this light, the accusations of the women directed at "Coetzee" that he lacks human feeling, that he is only a one-dimensional man

[21] Coetzee, one of whose major orientation points in literature is Kafka, would have no problem pointing out the counterexample.

of dry intellect, can be seen as just displacements of his own accusation about his attitude towards his father. This displacement becomes even clearer if we take into consideration that the women in question are themselves suspiciously one-dimensional and "wooden": they are really rather crude incarnations of the basic conventional types of women in literary or cinematic fiction – a bored city housewife, a golden-hearted country girl, a passionate Latina, an intellectual sophisticate – all of them offering platitudes on children, loving, and dancing (and sometimes even writing). Who else are they, in fact, than the furies (or Eumenides: the gracious or kind-hearted ones), the chthonic deities or vengeance, psychologistically interpreted as remorse. In this light, the repeated female advice to "Coetzee" that "he should find himself a decent woman" (142), turns out to have a highly ironic ring – because this is precisely what he did (in fact, four of them) and that is why there is finally no escape from the South African sublime: the most shameful pleasure Rousseau confesses to in his famous work is the sensual pleasure he takes in being beaten by a woman.



Postscript: *The Lives of Animals* (1999)

The Lives of Animals is an atypical affair, because it consists of two asymmetrical parts. The first part is a kind of literary work by J. M. Coetzee; the second one consists of "academic" comments (even if one of them has the form of a dialogue) of a literary scholar, a philosopher, a religious studies scholar and an anthropologist (none of them fictional) on the ideas presented in the literary text. Therefore, we are dealing here with heterogeneous fields engaged in a dialogue, which, in a sense, produces frustration on both sides of the "barricade." On the one hand, Elizabeth Costello, Coetzee's protagonist, emphasises her aversion, perhaps even hostility, towards academic discourse (although Coetzee himself used to be an academic), which, according to her, chases its own tail and does not want to notice what lies outside of academia. On the other hand, the academic commentators do not know how they should really treat something, which, although it is a "fiction," seems to raise pressing ethical issues.

No wonder the academics are frustrated – *The Lives of Animals* originates in a rather perfidious gesture by Coetzee. When he was invited to take part in the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton, he read a literary work to those assembled, in which a supposedly known (but fictional) Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello (not he, J. M. Coetzee),[1] accepts an invitation from an American university (not Princeton, but a fictional Appleton College), in order to give two lectures on a topic of her choice and surprises

[1] Coetzee gave these lectures in 1997 and 1998, when he still lived and worked in South Africa. In 2002, he moved permanently to Costello's homeland.

her hosts, who expect a subject related to literature or literary criticism, by delivering two ardent speeches calling upon her listeners to empathise with animals and criticising the eating of meat. (We may presume that Coetzee's hosts were as surprised, because they probably expected lectures devoted to the ethics of literature, the topic which is treated *ad nauseam* in critical works devoted to this author). Thus, from the start Coetzee puts his adversaries, or even well-disposed commentators, in an awkward position. One of the latter, Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher working in the U.S. and the author of *Animal Liberation*, a bible of the movement to which Costello subscribes, puts it this way:

> But *are* they Coetzee's arguments? That's just the point – that's why I don't know how to go about responding to this so-called lecture. They are *Costello's* arguments. Coetzee's fictional device enables him to distance himself from them. And he has this character, Norma, Costello's daughter-in-law, who makes all the obvious objections to what Costello is saying. It's a marvellous device, really. Costello can blithely criticize the use of reason, or the need to have any clear principles or proscriptions, without Coetzee really committing himself to these claims. Maybe he really shares Norma's very proper doubts about them. Coetzee doesn't even have to worry too much about getting the structure of the lecture right. When he notices that it is starting to ramble, he just has Norma say that Costello is rambling.[2]

Therefore Coetzee, as a "civil person," seemingly disowns the views propagated by his alter ego, but only in order to give them greater force, because they are propagated from a position that disarms an opponent's arguments in advance.

Thus, each commentator has to deal in some way with the impossibility of a "direct" comment, and each of them does it in his or her own way, inevitably erasing the distance established by Coetzee between the space of literary truth and the space of the truth of rational argumentation. Marjorie Garber (a literary scholar) having analysed the form of the lectures and genres which they evoke, puts a rhetorical question, "Could it be, however, that all along [Coetzee] was really asking, 'What is the value of literature?'"(84). Peter Singer, in spite of his already cited doubts, analyses Costello's arguments in his usual rationalistic-pragmatic way. Wendy Doniger (a religious

[2] J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 91. Further references in the body of the text. All emphases original, unless otherwise noted.

studies scholar) identifies with Coetzee's protagonist ("we can understand [animals] because we love them" (102)). Barbara Smuts (an anthropologist) brackets the entire philosophical discussion and gives an example of a possible friendship between animals and man.

What is, therefore, the position from which Coetzee speaks, and what is the truth of this position if it is different (at least in intention) from the truth of academic reason and its discourse? Costello claims that academic discussions are propelled by an insipid use of reason, which, in the final analysis, aims only at justifying itself. In semi-caricature it goes like this:

> Can we, asked this philosopher, strictly speaking, say that the veal calf misses its mother? Does the veal calf have enough of a grasp of the significance of the mother-relation, does the veal calf have enough of a grasp of the meaning of maternal absence, does the veal calf, finally, know enough about missing to know that the feeling it has is the feeling of missing?
>
> A calf who has not mastered the concepts of presence and absence, of self and other – so goes the argument – cannot, strictly speaking, be said to miss anything. In order to, strictly speaking, miss anything, it would first have to take a course in philosophy. (65–66)

One has to add that all philosophical arguments (there are also others, to which we shall return) brought to bear against Costello concern the faculty of reason, which supposedly divides man from animals absolutely, and therefore justifies inflicting death and suffering on them (for instance in experimenting on them).[3] In other words, all of them refer in a more or less straightforward manner to Costello's main enemy, that is, René Descartes, known for establishing an absolute dualism of body and spirit, which is accompanied by the assertion that animals are insentient machines. To be sure, a contemporary Cartesian – and it seems that in *The*

[3] In Singer's *Animal Liberation*, there are descriptions of many completely idiotic experiments conducted on animals, for instance: "At Brooks Air Force Base in Texas, monkeys are trained through electric shocks to keep these platforms level by means of controls that simulate the flying of Air Force bombers. They are then gassed or irradiated to test how long they can continue to keep the platforms level under simulated conditions of chemical or nuclear attack" (the caption to a photograph in an insert following page 157, referring to a longer analysis on pages 25–28). Of course, this is another way academic reason justifies itself – it invents experiments that serve no purpose other than inventing more (equally idiotic) experiments on their basis. *Animal Liberation* was first published in 1975. The quote comes from Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Ecco, 2002).

Lives of Animals every philosopher has a Cartesian approach to animals, including (the real) Peter Singer, who, as already quoted, shares "Norma's [a fictional philosopher's] very proper doubts" – no longer maintains that animals do not feel pain; he even wants to prevent their suffering, but none the less, because they lack self-consciousness, and above all the consciousness of death, he or she considers them to be on a different level of existence. Philosopher O'Hearne, Costello's fictional adversary, expresses this in the most "friendly" way:

> I make the following statement with due deliberation, mindful of the historical associations it may evoke. I do not believe that life is as important to animals as it is to us. There is certainly in animals an instinctive struggle against death, which they share with us. But they do not *understand* death as we do, or rather, as we fail to do. There is, in the human mind, a collapse of the imagination before death, and that collapse of the imagination […] is the basis of our fear of death. That fear does not and cannot exist in animals, since the effort to comprehend extinction, and the failure to do so, the failure to master it, have simply not taken place.
>
> For that reason, I want to suggest, dying is, for an animal, just something that happens, something against which there may be a revolt of the organism but not a revolt of the soul. (63)

O'Hearne speaks as if he has not understood that he is thereby confirming Costello's accusation that (academic, philosophical) reason is one huge tautology: "Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe – what else should it do? Dethrone itself? Reasoning systems, as systems of totality, do not have that power. If there were a position from which reason could attack and dethrone itself, reason would already have occupied that position; otherwise it would not be total" (25). Thus, if we take into consideration that Coetzee himself is a vegetarian or a vegan and Costello is, therefore, in some way his alter ego (the author himself makes her a lecturer and puts her in a position which reveals his own: a lecturer at Princeton), one can here perceive the aim of Coetzee's literary construction, which is, without abandoning rational argumentation, not to allow academic reason to act out its tautological comedy. In other words, Coetzee reinforces his criticism of academic reason by creating a space of enunciation within which this kind of reason is not able to take the position it is used to. One can therefore say that, by creating a sort of metanarration (a lecture relating a lecture), Coetzee wanted to resort to a different kind of rationality,

a rationality which would go beyond the academic one, which so far has only rationalised cruelty which as such is irrational.

One can perhaps say that a similar desire produces another gesture, the criticism of which is presented as the most important ethical charge against Costello in *The Lives of Animals*: the comparison of what happens to animals in slaughterhouses and laboratories to Auschwitz. Firstly, one should note that this is not a rational comparison: it is easy to find rational arguments against it (the logic of *Vernichtung* is not a commodity logic as is that of the consumption of animals, etc.), but of course this is not the point. As Peter Singer himself points out (referring also to writer Isaac B. Singer): "a comparison is not necessarily an equation" (86). Moreover, we learn that although (the real) philosopher Singer himself lost his grandparents in Nazi death camps, he does not feel offended by the comparison, unlike (the fictional) poet Abraham Stern, whose attitude inscribes itself into the well-known semi-religious approach to Auschwitz: any comparison to what happened to Jews there, and especially comparing them to animals, that is, to creatures commonly considered as lower beings, is sacrilege; it "insults the memory of the dead. It also trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way" (50).[4] Nonetheless, because Auschwitz is "incomprehensible," because it was "the product of pure metaphysical decision,"[5] it seems it can serve Costello's attempt to go beyond academic reason well. However, because her rhetoric is based on emotional blackmail – it summons the greatest crime to shut the adversary up[6] – it can be used in either direction. An adversary can say, for instance, that Costello's approach to men reminds him of Hitler's, who was also a vegetarian and antivivisectionist.

Apart from her "performative" attempt to create a space beyond the academic discourse, the very titles of Costello's lectures – "The Philosophers and the Animals" and "The Poets and the Animals" – suggest her main strategy: she contrasts two different ideas of truth by identifying philosophical rationalism with indifference, while po-

[4] Coetzee himself refers in the notes to one of the better known philosophical books exemplifying this approach, *La fiction du politique* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, published in English as *Heidegger, Art and Politics*.

[5] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 48.

[6] This is not the place to develop this extensive topic, but we might mention that, as Alain Badiou notes, the more often the "singularity" or uniqueness of Auschwitz is emphasised, the more it is used as *the* measure of so-called radical Evil. It is claimed that the Nazi extermination of the Jews is incomparable, but every collective crime gets compared to it.

etry is presented as a discourse of empathy. Costello's two "irrational" propositions are "open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (37; for the aforementioned reasons, she thinks that the philosophical mind cannot be "opened"), and "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another" (35), an animal in this case. Therefore, firstly, the heart is presented as an antidote to the vicious circle of reason. Secondly, empathy is proposed as man's most important faculty, and is contrasted with rationality as a power surpassing it.

These claims, of course, lead to all kinds of problems. Singer comments on the first one thus: "I feel, but I also think about what I feel. When people say we should *only* feel – and at times Costello comes close to that in her lecture – I'm reminded of Göring, who said, 'I think with my blood'" (88–89). Hitler the vegetarian (because of compassion for animals) also fits in here quite well. But one can also use examples unrelated to emotional blackmail involving the Nazis. For instance, Sade justifies his opposition to the death penalty by claiming that every real crime is a matter of the heart and "cold" (rational!) law is unable to judge it justly (in "Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans," for instance).

Concerning empathy, Costello says amazing things. For instance, she claims that poet Ted Hughes "shows us that we too can embody animals – by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquillity, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us" (53).

This reference to a poetic attempt at identification with an animal from its own perspective, made by Hughes, is quite interesting because in a different place, when Costello criticises (the real, not fictional) philosopher Thomas Nagel, because he denies the possibility of "embodying" a bat,[7] she disqualifies the senses as a basis for this kind of empathy: "[Nagel suggests that] we need to be able to experience bat-life through the sense-modalities of a bat. But he is wrong; or at least he is sending us down a false trail. To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human-being

[7] Nagel is quoted by Costello: "I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted by the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task" (31).

in the second, maybe; but those are secondary considerations. To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is *joy*" (33). Yet the problem is that, even if we admit that animals experience such fullness of being, man is precisely a creature who *lacks* such fullness. As a desiring being, his most defining feature is a lack which cannot be filled – even if one's desire is finally realised, it always turns out that "this is not it," because every "fullness" (satisfaction) is accompanied by the feeling that there must be some "fuller fullness." One can even, somewhat cruelly, note that Costello herself can serve here as the best example: her main problem seems to be the lack of the feeling of fullness of being and joy, which culminates in the last scene when she bursts out crying in the arms of her son and thinking: "Calm down, I tell myself, you are making a mountain out of a molehill. This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*" (69).

How can we, then, "embody" fullness, something we cannot experience? Surprisingly, it turns out we can do it by means of pure abstraction, because fullness is a sublime idea of reason. As infinity, fullness is accessible to us only as an idea, which we can understand though we cannot imagine it and therefore experience it sensually. Things are therefore exactly opposite to what Costello claims: "When Hughes the poet stands before the jaguar cage, he looks at an individual jaguar and is possessed by that individual jaguar life. It has to be that way. Jaguars in general, the subspecies jaguar, the idea of a jaguar, will fail to move him because we cannot experience abstractions" (53). Yet it is in fact abstraction that Hughes experiences, although he himself would surely support Costello's claims. As Nagel noted, trying to embody a jaguar, Hughes must rely on the resources of his own mind and therefore cannot "insert" any sensuous data into this experience. Therefore, the faculty of his imagination is defeated in confrontation with the emptiness of the notion Jaguar and the experience of this breakdown, this impossibility, is taken for an "opening," for an experience of fullness which is beyond-reason and beyond-human. In other words, we are dealing here with purely abstract self-affectation of the imagination by means of language. And if we can talk about the "primitive" experience of man (regarding Hughes's "shamanistic" inspirations), this is where we find it. In John Berger's words: "Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here*. Likewise they were mortal and immortal. An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This […] was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred

and sacrificed."[8] Perhaps we no longer perceive animals in this way, but there is nothing good about that – when ox ceases to be Ox, it becomes a commodity.

Is it, therefore, possible for reason to go beyond itself? Paradoxically, this is, in a sense, what Singer suggests in *Animal Liberation*, but only for the greater glory of reason. Taking as self-evident the Other's right to respect, he founds men's equality in their physical, non-rational aspect. This allows him to draw a rational conclusion that because animals appreciate relief from pain as much as men, the right to "physical" respect must also apply to them.[9] This exclusion of the founding aspect from reason does not make Singer's philosophy irrational, but in fact allows for its hyper-rationality, exemplified by the way it treats "scientific research" as absolute authority: "How can anyone who has not made a thorough study of the topic [animal suffering] possibly know that the problem is less serious than problems of human suffering?"[10] A purely ideological question (what is important in order to act well?) is reduced here to the outcome of scientific research, that is, to measurements by means of instruments (even if we put aside the question of how pain can be measured). This approach leads to absurd problems, exemplified for instance by Singer's remark that because oysters do not have a central nervous system up to a point, he ate them, but then he stopped, because perhaps they feel pain after all, or when he says that hens probably do not have anything against their eggs being taken away (perhaps one should try to measure this?). This way, truth is made equal to knowledge (or, in fact, to instrumental reason), which allows Singer to keep repeating that "we have the capacity to reason about what it is best to do," and "almost everyone is prepared to listen to reason."[11]

How much reason, however, is in this reason? Another definition of reason should therefore be proposed – the instrument not of cogitation, but of fidelity to truth. Thus, apart from the dualism presented by Costello, which opposes reason (rationalism: cogitation and knowledge) and heart (irrationalism beyond reason), one has also to consider "irrational" reason (although it sounds like an oxymoron, this is only because of the long history of identifying thinking with knowledge), which is not determined by "scientific facts." One can il-

[8] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in: *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 6–7.

[9] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 238.

[10] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 219.

[11] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 225, 243

lustrate the way it works with the following example. Some time ago the world press reported on the results of a study conducted in the U.S., which was said to show that black Americans were statistically less able intellectually than representatives of other races. Putting aside here doubts pertaining to the instruments of such research and the accepted standards of "scientificity" (on which Costello has a lot to say), it is the postulate of *reason* that the ideal of equality of all men is maintained, even if the abovementioned data turn out to be empirically true.

I have not provided the above example randomly, but to juxtapose its truth with the truth of the way Singer's "rationality" protests against speciesism: "But pain is pain, and the importance of preventing unnecessary pain and suffering does not diminish because the being that suffers is not a member of our species. What would we think of someone who said that "whites come first" and that therefore poverty in Africa does not pose as serious a problem as poverty in Europe?"[12] Perhaps nobody (no politician especially) would be sincere enough to formulate it like that in the media, but in the above words Singer formulated a pragmatic conviction of the rich West (or North, if you wish), undoubtedly based on "scientific" accounting, that is, a conviction according to which the West behaves and which it rationally believes.

One can therefore propose, although it may look absurd at first sight, that – as in the case of an apparent paradox that in a time when there reigns an ideology of respect for the Other, everybody in the West firmly believes that poverty in Africa (not to mention the AIDS epidemic) is a less serious problem than poverty in Europe or the U.S. – although almost everybody eats meat, the reigning ideology in the West is animal liberation. If we acknowledge that the foundation of our ethics is the right not to feel pain (the philosophic version) and the right to happiness, that is, to consumption (the market version), reason (even more than compassion) makes it imperative that we expand this right to include animals, as Singer rightly argues. Thus, however, the ideology of the respect for the Other begins to appear unsettling – the real Altogether Other, the one with whom, according to Levinas, we can never identify, turns out not to be another man created in God's image, but the animal Other. And here perhaps lies the reason for the "repression" in everyday life of *rational* (vegetarian) conclusions that should follow from the dominant ideology – the image of the Other is the image of the

[12] Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 220

animal (also the human animal) with which we neither can nor *want* to identify.

From this point of view, although Costello and Singer fight for the same cause, their "brotherhood in arms" can be treated as rather accidental. Looking at it from Costello's angle, Singer is only another example of a rationalist, which actually means a pragmatic, that is, somebody who translates *superstitions* (in the sense of common opinion) into rational thought. But precisely because of that Singer is undoubtedly right, when he calls the philosophical arguments against his position, which are based on the absolutisation of the difference between man and animal, (irrational) *subterfuges* of people who do not really think, but look for pretexts to eat meat.

Singer's remark about poverty is a good illustration of the main problem with his idea of animal liberation. Contrary to Singer's claims that it is a political movement and that vegetarianism and veganism are ways of boycotting the highest power these days, that is, the power of the market, animal liberation is the ideology, which, trying to change our eating habits, leaves everything else as it is. A good example of this is one of Singer's apparently humanitarian arguments for not eating meat: breeding animals for meat means wasting food, because in order to produce a pound of animal proteins we have to provide an animal with many more pounds of plant proteins.[13] And because the animals kept in feedlots do not eat grass but soy, corn, millet and other cereals, which could be eaten by people, the problem of hunger in the world could be solved if plant food were not wasted on the mass raising of animals.[14] Yet the problem of hunger in the world is not primarily a problem of the shortage of food but of property and profit. As Alain Badiou bitingly claims in an interview, "what is needed for running water, schools, hospitals, and food enough for all humanity is a sum that corresponds to the amount spent by wealthy Western countries on perfume in a year."[15] Animals are treated like things not primarily because people have stupid (irrational) habits, but because they are private property

[13] "So most estimates conclude that plant foods yield about ten times as much protein per acre as meat does, although estimates vary, and the ratio sometimes goes as high as twenty to one" (Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 165).

[14] The shortage of food in the world is, in fact, a veritable mantra in discussions of this type. O'Hearne argues against Costello that animal rights activists "want all animals to lead […] a utopian life in which everyone is miraculously fed and no one preys on anyone else" (64).

[15] Christoph Cox, Molly Whalen, and Alain Badiou, "On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *Cabinet*, Issue 5, Winter 2001/02. 29 Jan. 2018, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php>.

(which is sacred), and because the highest form of rationality under capitalism is profit, and this is the rationality (the "scientific" laws of the market) which causes people to die of hunger in underdeveloped countries. Therefore, it is probably not an accident that for Singer *consumption* (a change of menu) replaces politics – we are dealing here with a movement which has in advance submitted to the reason of the market, for which consumption is the end and the highest duty because "there is no alternative." In fact, we are not speaking here about a counterculture, which aims at reformulating the laws in which it feels imprisoned, but about another subculture, whose needs the market is happy to satisfy, providing it with tofu and almond milk.

Thus, what we are describing is a variety of paralysis in the face of the dominant ideology: we have to change technologies of food production in order to eradicate hunger in the world, while, from the technical point, the problem does not exist, because it is possible to produce the needed amount without changes in technology. In the context of Costello's crusade, Norma says, "Respect for everyone's worldview, the cow's worldview, the squirrel's worldview, and so forth. In the end it leads to total intellectual paralysis. You spend so much time respecting that you haven't time left to think" (47). One should, of course, note that Norma is a philosopher, so for her thinking means doing. But one should also ask oneself what she expresses with her statement. She does not even try to present the problem "objectively," but simply spits venom, because she cannot stand her mother-in-law and we even learn why: "I would have more respect for her if she didn't try to undermine me behind my back, with her stories to the children about the poor little veal calves and what the bad men do to them" (68). Therefore, the truth of Norma's charge concerning paralysis is able to appear not because truth has the habit of objectively surfacing, but because Norma is engaged in an "ideological" struggle with her mother-in-law and all her "reasonable" objections are the stuff of the struggle itself. In other words, contrary to what Singer claims ("[Coetzee] has this character, Norma, Costello's daughter-in-law, who makes all the obvious [philosophical] objections to what Costello is saying"), Norma touches the truth of Costello's position not when she criticises her ideas in a rationalistic way (in fact, her arguments boil down to what other philosophers say in the text: animals are, in a sense, machines), that is, when she chases her philosophical tail, but when she engages in a struggle for domination:

> And maybe [...] the whole notion of cleanness versus uncleanness has a completely different function, namely, to enable certain groups to self-define themselves, negatively, as elite, as elected. We are the people who abstain from *a* or *b* or *c*, and by that power of abstinence we mark ourselves off as superior: as a superior caste within society, for instance. Like the Brahmins. [...] The ban on meat that you get in vegetarianism is only an extreme form of dietary ban [...] and a dietary ban is a quick, simple way for an elite group to define itself. (42)

Costello has to defend herself and, as is her habit, she comes up with a Big Name (though it has to be a lesser one this time, because the biggest of them all, Auschwitz, has already been used by her):

> Gandhi was sent off to England as a young man to study law. England, of course, prided itself as a great meat-eating country. But his mother made him promise not to eat meat. She packed a trunk full of food for him to take along. During the sea voyage he scavenged a little bread from the ship's table and for the rest ate out of his trunk. In London he faced a long search for lodgings and eating-houses that served his kind of food. Social relations with the English were difficult because he could not accept or return hospitality. It wasn't until he fell in with certain fringe elements of English society – Fabians, theosophists, and so forth – that he began to feel at home. Until then he was just a lonely little law student. (42–43)

This story is supposed to show that "Gandhi's vegetarianism can hardly be conceived as the exercise of power. It condemned him to the margins of society" (43), but of course the conviction of remaining faithful to oneself (one's principles) against the cruel world is one of the basic forms of creating the feeling of one's superiority, especially among the marginalised. This mechanism involves a double identification: firstly, we identify with a certain image of ourselves (particular values), and, secondly, with the image of faithfulness to oneself (how great it is to be faithful to oneself when others are not). Empathy works in a similar way. As we have already noted, the "embodying" of an animal ("entering" into its senses) is impossible, and its "fullness" is accessible to us only negatively as an abstract idea. Therefore, what happens when we "open our hearts" to animals, war victims, etc.? We identify with the image of suffering we see or imagine and simultaneously with the image of ourselves as compassionate (it is so humanitarian to feel compassion). In other words, we are dealing here with a phenomenon that is, in the final

analysis, narcissistic (which, of course, does not mean that it is necessarily bad).

Isn't this one of the psychic mechanisms (not the only one, to be sure) behind the animal rights discourse? Animal rights are not, strictly speaking, animal rights, because animals cannot originate them – a right appears *ex nihilo* when somebody starts to demand it. Therefore, because animal rights are demanded by men, they are, in fact, human rights. Human rights to what, however? As we have already mentioned, in our rich contemporary world there is only one right which is generally accepted: the right to feel good. What does "good" mean, however, in this context? As we have already noted, the natural state of feeling good ("fullness") does not exist, because our desire always prompts us to think that there must surely be some "better good," and therefore our state of happiness is permanently deferred, that is, spoiled. In other words, the absolute measure of satisfaction does not exist. Instead, there are ersatz, secondary satisfactions, determined relatively – I feel good when I am better off than others, when I am richer, more beautiful, more compassionate than they are. In other words, the right to happiness, to feel good, is the right to feel superior.

However, Costello's compassion does not make her happy at all. On the contrary, as has been mentioned already, her characteristic "tone" is one of despair, which is almost absolute and which she does not seem to understand herself ("Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can't you? *Why can't you?*"). Where does is come from, then? What is the origin of her emotionally "irrational" wish to make animals and humans equal, which is criticised even by Singer? When Costello speaks about empathy, claiming that "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another," she comes up with a strange (and absurd, if taken literally) example: "For instants at a time, […] I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it, refuse to entertain it" (32). Perhaps, however, we do not encounter here an example of the infinite capabilities of a person to think him- or herself into otherness, but quite a realistic description of Costello's own situation. Does her obsession with animal death not come from her feeling (even if not fully conscious) that she herself is, in a sense, already regarded as dead? Because it is in her figure that we can realise the reverse side of the civilisation which places the right to enjoy at its centre, of the symbolic order that represses death, which considers it a new taboo. Although death is omnipresent in our media (prime time television is dominated by

films in which people die and death is investigated an infinite number of times), it is this compulsion to repeat which shows that our culture is unable to create a place of inscription for death, to find meaning for it.[16] Therefore, although its images proliferate, death remains, in a sense, repressed, and with it also the people whom death visibly marks. In a culture founded on the right to enjoyment, whose imaginary is strictly connected with youth, aged people are not only perceived by others as worthless, they also consider themselves worthless, because in our symbolic universe there is no place from which an aged person could see him- or herself as worthy of love. This is probably even more acute in case of aged women than men – perhaps the only "good" symbolic role assigned to them is the role of a grandmother who sacrifices herself to *someone else's* happiness, the happiness of her grandson or granddaughter. Therefore Costello can quite realistically feel herself to be a (symbolic) "corpse" and one can understand her appeal to (the infinite capabilities of) empathy as simply a cry of despair. Thus, Costello's reference to Auschwitz is perhaps not so unethical as Stern might think, if animal death and suffering, *which nobody wants to notice*, are, in the final analysis, a hyperbole of her own life, which is regarded as worthless. We can even say that, in this respect, the last page of Coetzee's work offers a wry kind of happy ending – the call to empathy for a (human) animal is answered by Costello's son John, when on the way to the airport his mother dissolves into tears. Although all the stress of the visit, caused by the reaction to the views propagated by her and the struggle for domination with her daughter-in-law, had already ended the previous day, and what Costello can expect is only a quiet flight home where her cats await her, John whispers in his mother's ear, "There, there. It will soon be over" (69), as if he simply had her death in mind.

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[16] Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2008), 74.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank David Schauffler for helping me to give shape to the final form of this book.

An earlier version of "Autobiography as Fiction" was published as "The South African Sublime: J. M. Coetzee and Autobiography in the New Millennium" in *Beyond 2000: The Recent Novel in English*, ed. Ewa Rychter (Wałbrzych: Wydawnictwo Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Zawodowej im. Angelusa Silesiusa w Wałbrzychu, 2011).

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Name Index

Sławomir Masłoń

Père-wersje prawdy: powieści J.M. Coetzeego

Streszczenie

Autor stawia sobie za zadanie ujęcie twórczości powieściowej J.M. Coetzeego od innej strony niż większość krytyków ma w zwyczaju. Zwykłą praktyką, do której zresztą pisarstwo to zachęca, jest jego ogląd z pozycji „humanistycznej", krytykującej nadużycia kolonializmu i konfrontującej przemoc z problemami egzystencjalnymi Człowieka na drodze do Prawdy i samorealizacji.

Mimo że w dzisiejszym świecie autorytet uniwersaliów, takich jak Człowiek i Prawda, został mocno nadszarpnięty, gdyż może być postrzegany jako zawsze służący czyimś interesom, wydaje się że Coetzee stworzył na swój użytek metodę pisarską, w której podstawowe cechy powieści humanistycznej mogą być zachowane, a która jednak stara się bronić przed zarzutami uwikłania w grę przemocy i interesów, pragnąc okazać levinasowski szacunek dla Innego.

Narracja powieści Coetzeego zwykle oscyluje wokół pustego miejsca stworzonego przez autora w jej wnętrzu, wokół zagadki, którą powieść będzie się starała rozwiązać, ale przez którą w końcu zostanie pokonana. W jego wczesnych utworach spotkanie pomiędzy zagadką a objaśniającą narracją rozgrywa się jako konfrontacja ofiary kolonializmu z przedstawicielem liberalnej („humanistycznej") części społeczeństwa kolonizatorów, przeciwnym używaniu przemocy. W późniejszych powieściach konfrontacja przenosi się coraz bardziej do wewnątrz dyskursu dominującego, jednak centralna „niewyjaśnialna" zagadka, jak i tematyka władzy i przemocy w stosunkach międzyludzkich, pozostają w ich centrum. (Wyjątkiem jest tu ostatnia powieść *Powolny człowiek*, która rozgrywa się w bezpiecznej Australii, jednak i ta narracja koncentruje się wokół swego rodzaju zagadki). Tego rodzaju konstrukcja pozwala na stworzenie innego rodzaju uniwersalium zwanego Innym, a posiadającego sprzeczne cechy. Jest On bowiem dla nas „pusty" (jego „życioświat" jest dla nas niedostępny), a zarazem niesamowicie „pełny" (niedostępna dla nas „etniczna substancja" stanowi o jego prawdzie). W ten oto sposób Prawda zostaje zrelatywizowana (jest inna dla każdej substancji etnicznej), to owa substancja staje się najwyższym dobrem, a więc Sprawiedliwością jako taką.

Analizie poddano kolejne powieści Coetzeego (z wyjątkiem dwóch pierwszych, w których wspomniany wyżej mechanizm nie jest jeszcze dostatecznie wypracowany), a zawarte w nich przesłanki dyskursu humanistycznego są konfrontowane z wybranymi koncepcjami teorii psychoanalitycznej, w szczególności Jacques'a Lacana, oraz

ich polityczną aplikacją dokonywaną przez Slavoja Žižka. W ten sposób autor stara się pokazać polityczne, narracyjne i egzystencjalne konsekwencje postaw przyjętych przez bohaterów tego rodzaju uwspółcześnionej wersji powieści humanistycznej. Mimo że motywują oni swe poczynania bezwzględnym posłuszeństwem Sprawiedliwości wyższej od każdego prawa (objawiającej się na różne cząstkowe sposoby jako szacunek dla Innego, honor itp.), w rzeczywistości czerpią narcystyczną rozkosz z takiego stosunku, jako że to uniwersalium stanowi eksternalizację ich obrazu samego siebie w modalności „transcendentalnej" – obrazu „pustego" tylko dlatego, że przekracza on wszelkie pojęcie, czyli właściwie będącego obrazem pełni (tu kryje się tajemnica pełni Innego), która unieważnia wszelkie granice i dlatego dostarcza najwyższej rozkoszy, nawet jeśli jest ona bolesna.

Sławomir Masłoń

Père-Versionen der Wahrheit: J. M. Coetzees Romane

Zusammenfassung

Der Verfasser setzt sich ein Ziel, J. M. Coetzees Romane von anderer Seite als das die meisten Literaturkritiker tun, zu erforschen. Diese Werke waren meistens aus „humanistischer" Sicht betrachtet, es wurden kolonialistische Missbräuche kritisiert und die Gewalt mit existentiellen Problemen des Menschen auf seinem Wege nach Wahrheit und Selbstverwirklichung konfrontiert.

In der heutigen Welt haben solche Universalien wie Mensch und Wahrheit stark an Bedeutung verloren, denn sie können als solche betrachtet werden, die jemandes Interessen dienen sollten. Trotzdem scheint Coetzee seine eigene schriftstellerische Methode entwickeln zu haben, die die wichtigsten Eigenschaften des humanistischen Romans erkennen lässt, doch in ein Gewalt- und Interessenspiel nicht hineingezogen werden und vor dem Anderen die dem Levinas ähnliche Achtung haben wollte.

Die von Coetzee in seinem Roman angewandte Erzählung schwankt meist rundum den darin geschaffenen freien Platz, rundum ein gewisses Rätsel, das der Roman zwar zu lösen versucht, doch von dem er schließlich überwunden werden muss. In seinen frühen Romanen ist das Zusammentreffen des Rätsels und der es erklärenden Erzählung eine gewisse Konfrontation des kolonialistischen Opfers mit dem Vertreter des liberalen („humanistischen") Teils der Gesellschaft der Kolonisatoren, der sich gegen Gewalt erklärt. In den nächsten Romanen findet diese Konfrontation schon viel mehr innerhalb des vorherrschenden Diskurses statt, doch das „unerklärbare" Haupträtsel und die die Macht und die Gewalt in zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen betreffenden Themen stehen nach wie vor im Mittelpunkt der Romane. Eine Abweichung davon ist der letzte Roman *Ein träger Mensch*, dessen Handlung sich im ungefährdeten Australien abspielt, obwohl auch diese Erzählung auf ein gewisses Rätsel gerichtet ist. Solch eine Werkstruktur erlaubt, eine weitere Universalie zu schaffen, nämlich das „Andere", das über kontradiktorische Eigenschaften verfügt. Das Andere erscheint uns zwar „leer" (seine Lebenswelt ist für uns nicht erreichbar) und „voll" zugleich (seine für uns unerreichbare „ethnische Substanz" entscheidet über dessen Wahrheit). Auf diese Weise obwohl die Wahrheit zwar gewissermaßen relativiert wird (jeder ethnischen Substanz entspricht eine andere Wahrheit), wird diese Substanz als solche zum höchsten Guten also zur Gerechtigkeit als solcher.

In vorliegender Monografie werden der Reihe nach alle Coetzees Romane (mit Ausnahme von den zwei ersten Romanen, in denen der oben genannte Mechanismus

noch nicht ausreichend herausgearbeitet worden ist) analysiert: alle darin enthaltenen Voraussetzungen des humanistischen Diskurses werden den ausgewählten Konzeptionen der psychoanalytischen Theorie, vor allem den des Jacques Lacans und deren politischen Applikation von Slavoj Žižek gegenübergestellt. Auf diese Weise versucht der Verfasser, politische, narrative und existentielle Folgen der Entscheidungen zu zeigen, die von den Helden der aktualisierten Version des humanistischen Romans getroffen wurden. Obwohl ihre Entscheidungen mit bedingungslosem Gehorsam der jeden Rechtes höheren Gerechtigkeit begründet werden, ziehen die Helden einen narzisstischen Genuss aus solch einer Beziehung, denn diese Universalie externalisiert ihr eigenes Bild in transzendentaler Modalität, das als ein „leeres“ Bild nur deswegen gilt, dass es jedes Vorstellungsvermögen übersteigt, also in Wirklichkeit ein volles Bild ist (hier kommt das Geheimnis der ganzen Fülle des Anderen zum Ausdruck), das alle Grenzen übersteigen zu können, den größten Vergnügen bereitet, selbst wenn es auch schmerzlich sein sollte.

Copy editing and proofreading
Gabriela Marszołek

Cover design
Łukasz Kliś

Prints and drawings
Tomasz Tobolewski

Technical editing
Małgorzata Pleśniar

Typesetting
Barbara Wilk

ISSN 0208-6336
ISBN 978-83-226-3439-4
(print edition)
ISBN 978-83-226-3440-0
(digital edition)

Published by
Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego
ul. Bankowa 12B, 40-007 Katowice
www.wydawnictwo.us.edu.pl
e-mail: wydawus@us.edu.pl

Expanded Second Edition.
Publishing sheets: 18.0 + 5 inserts. Printed sheets: 16.5.
Paper: offset, grade III, 90 g Price 38 zł (+ VAT)

Printing and binding:
Volumina.pl Daniel Krzanowski
ul. Księcia Witolda 7–9, 71-063 Szczecin

ISSN 0208-6336
Price 38 PLN (+ VAT)
ISBN 978-83-226-3439-4

About this book